

**Partnerships in Meaning-Making:
Digital Storytelling as Cultural Sustainability Practice**

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Abstract

This reflective paper summarizes research that explored digital storytelling as a potential method for cultural sustainability practice. The digital storytelling process involves the production in a facilitated workshop setting of short (3-5 minute) personal narratives that include photographs, art or music, and first-person narration. Findings presented in this paper suggest that digital storytelling provides not only a complementary method for engaging community partners, but also offers important insights into issues of power, representation, positionality, and ethical practice. The paper includes recommendations for bringing cultural sustainability principles to digital storytelling practice, as well as models for bringing the digital storytelling approach to the practice of cultural sustainability. The paper concludes by introducing a website concept – the *Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub* – as an online resource for connecting digital storytelling practitioners with culture workers and community partners who are interested in exploring digital storytelling applications in their work with communities.

Keywords: digital storytelling, cultural sustainability, culture, community

Executive Summary

I came to my research question as a direct result of my experiences in the Goucher College Master of Arts in Cultural Sustainability program: throughout my course of study, I noticed a recurring theme around representation – or as we often referred to it: “re-presentation.” In my classes and in conversations with faculty, students and alumni I’ve learned that cultural sustainability practice is guided by an ethic and commitment to representing our community partners with *fidelity* – i.e., accurately and authentically. And so, we come to this work with an attitude of deep listening, open to learning, and willing to reflect what we’ve learned back to these communities to test our assumptions and confirm that we’ve understood. In this way, our work is inherently reflexive – we are self-reflective in our approach and iterative in our processes. Importantly, we engage our community partners in this work of authentically representing their traditions and knowledge to others. We position ourselves as cultural brokers of sorts, connecting the people we work with to resources, platforms and participatory projects that amplify the voices we’ve come to know and honor. And yet, in spite of our care in this work, I’ve also observed clear tensions around the question: *What privilege do we assume when we authorize ourselves to tell someone else's story?* So as I was formulating my research question, I was thinking about ways we might invite and empower our community partners to participate more fully in cultural sustainability efforts.

When I learned about digital storytelling and its applications in areas such as community-building, education, health promotion and advocacy, I theorized that this might be an approach relevant to cultural sustainability practice as well. Moreover, digital storytelling is considered an innovative approach to engaging disenfranchised individuals whose voices are not typically represented in the public sphere. Both the applications and the potential for amplifying

community voice suggested a fit with cultural sustainability goals. Thus, my research question was to explore whether the digital storytelling approach can inform and advance our goal of supporting individuals and communities in identifying, protecting, and enhancing their cultural values and priorities.

Since I was interested in adapting the digital storytelling approach to cultural sustainability practice, I focused my attention on the practitioners who facilitate digital storytelling workshops. In their work, facilitators embody and model an attitude of deep listening, and they assume responsibility for holding a space that is respectful and fosters trust among workshop participants. I saw these facilitators as a proxy for the cultural researchers and community advocates who seek to support the communities we partner with. Thus, I wanted to understand how this occupational group approaches their work, how they position themselves, and – importantly – whether they identified tensions around this collaborative process. Based on what I learned, I would develop recommendations or models for cultural work practices that promote equity. In terms of methodology, my research involved a literature review that considered the digital storytelling landscape. In reviewing the scholarship related to digital storytelling, I also was alert to tensions around co-authorship, power dynamics and other challenges or critiques of the approach. In addition, I reviewed literature around narrative and performance theory, representation (including self-representation), voice (including related issues such as “untellability” or trauma narrative, and “refusal” or the withholding of story), as well as scholarship on listening and audience participation in meaning-making. I also reviewed literature on “embodied” and reflexive research practice. In addition to the literature review, I conducted fieldwork and trained as a facilitator in order to gain a first-hand understanding of the digital storytelling process and the facilitator’s role. I was an observant participant in three digital storytelling workshops – I was a participant in a public workshop, a facilitator-in-training, and a paid co-facilitator for a grant-funded workshop involving HIV-positive women and their case workers. These fieldwork experiences informed a questionnaire that I distributed to digital storytelling practitioners via my network. Through purposive sampling, I selected 8 respondents from the survey sample (N=47), as well as 1 facilitator from outside the respondent pool, and I conducted a total of 9 semi-structured interviews. Both the survey and interviews were designed to inspire self-reflection among practitioners, as well as collect their insights and perspectives related to their facilitation practice.

In terms of outcomes, I identified 6 major themes based on my fieldwork, survey data and semi-structured interviews with digital storytelling practitioners. As expected, these themes revealed both tensions and opportunities around digital storytelling practice. For example, there are clear challenges around the 3-day workshop format, even as the process itself has demonstrated success as a framework for orchestrating circumstances that support self-reflection and disclosure. Along these lines, there appear to be opportunities to adapt the workshop process to accommodate different competencies or cultural norms – an approach that fits with a fundamental practice principle of honoring the storyteller. The process also appears to foster empowerment among participant storytellers, and the sharing of digital stories can have likewise transformative effects on the audience. As revealed in these themes, facilitators play an active role in “surfacing” stories and participate in reflective practice with storytellers. Their approach involves deep listening, as well as cultivating a space for open, respectful communication that encourages intimacy and disclosure among participants. At the same time, the survey and interview data reflect a heightened awareness among facilitators that

the storyteller's authorship and agency are at stake when a facilitator steps in. Facilitators articulate a fragile balancing act between “surfacing” stories and leaving fingerprints that expose them as co-authors rather than “midwives” – a term digital storytelling practitioners use to describe their role. Related to this, the audience represents another facet of digital storytelling that can shape the story product. For instance, potential audiences can indirectly influencing the story that is told, how it is told, and what can be shared without risk to the participant storyteller. Finally, survey respondents and interviewees perceive an unrealized potential for the digital storytelling genre. Facilitators frequently raised concerns about its sustainability beyond the workshop setting, and there is a sense that the community is making a concerted effort to demonstrate relevance beyond the digital storytelling community.

These themes inform the recommendations I've proposed. The Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub (www.digitalstoryhub.net) is designed to function as a companion website to disseminate outcomes from this project, to grow awareness around digital storytelling, and to cultivate connections between the digital storytelling community (practitioners/facilitators) and those who work with communities – i.e., researchers, social scientists, community partners and other knowledge producers. The website is organized around three audiences: 1) the digital storytelling practitioner; 2) cultural researchers and other knowledge producers, such as community research collaborators; and 3) community partners and storytellers interested in learning about ways to incorporate digital storytelling in their work. Each audience will have a different interest and knowledge base and so recommendations and “the case” for how this research is relevant is pitched to that particular audience. In the case of Facilitators, webpages establish a platform for further co-constructing this research, both in terms of continuing the conversation and member-checking with the digital storytelling community. In the case of Cultural Researchers and Other Knowledge Producers, the focus is on advocating for ethical and responsive community-based work through story. The content presented makes the case that a digital storytelling approach informs methods for working with communities with humility, by enabling us to deconstruct who we are as “experts” in this work and illuminating our own positionality as researchers. Finally, in the case of Community Partners, the focus is on growing awareness around digital storytelling applications in fields such as education, community-building and community development. Relevant pages aim to connect community partners seeking to bring diverse perspectives to community development and capacity-building programs with experts in digital storytelling and cultural research. In addition, a moderated forum – *The Hub* (content forthcoming) – will promote conversations that extend beyond those occurring in the digital storytelling community. *The Hub* will be a venue for connecting researchers, advocates, community organizations and like-minded others with experienced digital storytelling practitioners who can offer advice and potentially collaborate on project and program design and implementation. Taken together, the website is intended to highlight and acknowledge how research is co-produced, as well as model how findings can be a springboard for ongoing reflection and dialogue with the community of interest.

Introduction

This reflective paper and the accompanying website concept – the Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub (www.digitalstoryhub.net) – critically examine digital storytelling as a potential technique for working with communities in ways that support cultural sustainability practice. Cultural sustainability seeks to support individuals and communities in identifying, protecting, and enhancing their important traditions, their ways of life, their cherished spaces, and their vital relationships to each other and the world (Goucher College 2016). In other words, cultural sustainability seeks to support cultural values and priorities that are often being overwhelmed by more compelling currencies. The discipline emphasizes work *with* communities through, for example, capacity-building or communicating understanding between cultural groups. In doing this work, we open ourselves to learning from our community partners. It's work that requires humility, respectful engagement and – above all – the ability to listen. In cultural sustainability, a lot of what we discuss centers on getting at meaning and values in the communities we work with. I chose to explore digital storytelling since it also incorporated my interests around narrative approaches to meaning-making, as well as the different ways in which knowledge is produced and privileged. Specifically, this research considers the occupational group of digital storytelling practitioners – the professionals who facilitate the digital storytelling workshops discussed in this paper. I wanted to understand how these practitioners approach their work, how they position themselves, and – importantly – whether they identified tensions around this collaborative process. My goal was to critically explore the strengths and weaknesses of this methodology in terms of cultural sustainability goals, and to develop recommendations or models for cultural work practices that promote equity.

Digital Storytelling Defined

The digital storytelling process involves the production in a facilitated workshop setting¹ of short (3-5 minute) personal narratives that include photographs, art or music, and first-person narration. Digital storytelling embraces vernacular creativity (Burgess 2006) and community-based meaning-making through a participatory multi-media process between storytellers and story facilitators. This process is achieved, in part, through the facilitator's role as a "co-creator" who evokes story and empowers through active listening. Digital storytellers manipulate still and moving images as well as sound to help transport their audience into the story experience. This multi-modal format provides the storyteller with a palette of tools to literally show versus

¹ Workshops are typically held in-person; however, workshops can also be held via an online format.

tell. For example, the storyteller can substitute an image for spoken word, and use vocal inflection, music or even silence to convey mood.

In practice, the production of digital stories takes place in a workshop setting where facilitators guide participant storytellers through a seven-step process that provides a framework for conceiving of, vetting and creating their digital stories.² This process was developed by StoryCenter – formerly known as the Center for Digital Storytelling. The organization is widely recognized as the prime mover and trainer in digital storytelling practice. Digital storytelling facilitators embody and model an attitude of deep listening, and they assume responsibility for holding a space that is respectful and fosters trust among workshop participants. It is a testament to their success in this practice that storytellers often share highly personal stories in these workshops – sometimes with complete strangers – taking advantage of this rare opportunity to be vulnerable and reflect with others. An integral component of the digital storytelling workshop is the story circle – a group process that involves all participants in listening and reflecting with the storyteller, and in providing feedback to support the participant in moving the story along in terms of developing the script. In the course of these 3-day workshops, facilitators introduce participants to the digital storytelling genre, they moderate the sharing of stories in a group story circle process, they offer guidance on scriptwriting and storyboarding, and they provide technical instruction around voice-over recording, as well as the visual narrative editing and production. At the end of the workshop, there is a story screening with the group. And, for some digital storytelling projects, stories are shared in public screenings as well.

Methods

This research project is informed by a year-long study³ involving literature review, observant participation (Moeran 2009; Tedlock 1991) in digital storytelling workshops, survey data and semi-structured interviews with digital storytelling practitioners. In the course of this project I have also trained as a digital storytelling facilitator, as detailed below.

In conducting this research, I had the good fortune to connect with Daniel Weinshenker, a specialist with widespread connections in the digital storytelling community and the Rocky

² Seven steps: 1) Owning Your Insights; 2) Owning Your Emotions; 3) Finding the Moment; 4) Seeing Your Story; 5) Hearing Your Story; 6) Assembling Your Story; and 7) Sharing Your Story. The 7 Steps provide a conceptual framework rather than “rules” with the exception that participants *must* tell a story only they can tell – one that relies on their personal insights and experience. **NOTE:** Another approach developed by Joe Lambert of StoryCenter is the 4 C’s – Connect, Context, Climax and Closure.

³ Research was conducted from February through December 2016; this research protocol was approved by the Goucher College IRB (approval no. 20141547).

Mountain/Midwest Region Director for StoryCenter. As mentioned above, StoryCenter is the organization that developed digital storytelling practice as I'm defining it in my research. The organization codified the seven-step workshop process in their *Digital Storytelling Cookbook* (Lambert 2010) and trained nearly all of the practitioners who participated in this study. In addition, I recruited Dr. Marty Otañez, to my Capstone committee – Otañez is a cultural anthropologist who applies digital media approaches to his research around health, social justice and sustainability, and is also highly active in the digital storytelling community. Weinshenker and Otañez introduced me to a growing network of digital storytelling facilitators, including the DS Working Group – a private Facebook group of over 550 practitioners from around the world. Digital storytelling practitioners use the DS Working Group forum to share techniques and advice, as well as events and updates relevant to their community of practice.

As part of my fieldwork, I participated in one of StoryCenter's public digital storytelling workshops (a prerequisite for facilitation training), as well as in their Facilitator's Retreat (train-the-trainer), and as a paid co-facilitator⁴ in one of StoryCenter's *Positive Stories* workshops – a grant-funded project involving HIV positive women and their case workers. These experiences as a participant observer – along with conversations with digital storytelling practitioners (Weinshenker and Otañez) – informed a survey that I developed and distributed to facilitators via the DS Working Group and to other digital storytelling practitioners outside the group membership. I am indebted to this community of practitioners who gave so generously of their time, sharing their perspectives and insights related to their experiences working with digital storytelling. In all, 47 digital storytelling practitioners responded to the survey which was designed to inspire self-reflection (see Appendix 1). Of the sample, 28 (60% of survey participants) provided email addresses, indicating they would be willing to participate in follow-up interviews. The survey provided for referral sampling as well – many respondents also supplied email addresses for other facilitators in response to my question, "Can you recommend to me a digital storytelling facilitator who may be interested to complete this survey? Provide details." I pursued the 13 leads referred by respondents, sending personalized invitations to participate in the survey. In completing the survey, 23 respondents also provided links to digital stories they had created. Most were personal stories, with a few links representative of respondents' work as facilitators (i.e., publically available digital stories produced through programs/projects facilitators were involved in). The personal stories, in particular, provided

⁴ I subsequently donated my facilitation fee to "Staying Positive" the related fundraiser to help fight stigma for women living with HIV.

invaluable insights into the facilitators as storytellers in their own right and provided me with an unconventional introduction to many of those I interviewed.

In all I conducted nine semi-structured interviews; eight interviewees were recruited from among the respondent pool. I recruited the ninth practitioner based on her application of digital storytelling to work involving Native American and Hispanic/Latino populations. Taken together, respondents and interviewees represented a highly international sample, including respondents from North America, Europe (Italy, UK, Denmark), Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Japan, among others.⁵ However, with few exceptions⁶, digital storytelling appears to be largely practiced in western, developed countries. Table 1.A summarizes the survey respondents' level of experience with digital storytelling facilitation.

Table 1.A: Respondent Demographics

Role in Digital Storytelling Process:		
Answer Choices	Responses	
Lead facilitator	85%	40
Co-facilitator	53%	25
Technical assistant	15%	7
Total Respondents: 47*		

Length of Time in this Role:		
Answer Choices	Responses	
Under 1 year	4%	2
1-3 years	17%	8
Over 3 years	79%	37
Total Respondents: 47*		

**Respondents could choose multiple answers; total exceeds 100%*

Respondent demographics can only be approximated given the limitations of the survey; however, more complete demographics are available for interviewees. These are summarized in Table 1.B:

⁵ Approximated based on email country suffixes when email addresses were provided.

⁶ One respondent is based in the U.S. but has conducted digital storytelling projects in Colombia. In addition, some digital storytelling practitioners in western countries are working with sovereign Indigenous populations in the U.S. and abroad.

Table 1.B: Interviewee Demographics

Role in Digital Storytelling Process:		
Answer Choices	Responses	
Lead facilitator	89%	8
Co-facilitator	56%	5
Technical assistant	0%	0
Total Respondents: 8*		
*Respondents could choose multiple answers; total exceeds 100%; 1 respondent was recruited outside of the survey mechanism.		
Gender:		#
Female	78%	7
Male	22%	2
Total Interviewees: 9		
Race/Ethnicity:		#
White/Caucasian	78%	7
African American	11%	1
Indigenous Chicana	11%	1
Total Interviewees: 9		

All interview subjects – including the interviewee recruited from outside the survey pool – reported more than 3 years’ experience with digital storytelling practice. Similar to the survey sample, the majority of facilitators interviewed received some portion of their training in digital storytelling facilitation through StoryCenter.⁷

In October 2016, I presented my preliminary research findings at the American Folklore Society (AFS) / International Society for Folk Narrative Research joint annual meeting in Miami. My talk problematized the complex dimensions of digital storytelling by showing how facilitators influence story sharing and meaning-making in supportive and contradictory ways. A particular focus concerned ethical issues of representation, facilitation and cultural research practice. At that meeting, I vetted my findings with colleagues at AFS and those in the narrative research community. I also shared that paper, entitled *Digital Storytelling as Process and Dialogue: Workshop Facilitators’ Role in Meaning-Making*, with Weinshenker and Otañez who provided additional comments that further inform this project. Finally, this study is further elaborated

⁷ Other training organizations reported by survey respondents include Digital Storylab Copenhagen (3 respondents), BBC Wales (2 respondents), Media Conte (Nagoya University, Japan; 1 respondent), Fundani Centre for Higher Education Development (Cape Peninsula University of Technology; 1 respondent), DigitalStory Vienna (1 respondent), and Stretch Charity (2 respondents).

through a companion website – The Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub (www.digitalstoryhub.net) – a venue for sharing themes that surfaced in my research, as well as for growing awareness around digital storytelling and connecting researchers, advocates, community organizations and others with experienced digital storytelling practitioners.

Findings

In doing this research, I've been particularly interested to explore ethical issues related to narrative co-creation and the politics of representation, as well as the way in which the digital arena and participatory roles can offer a democratic platform. As mentioned, the survey was designed to encourage self-reflection among practitioners, a group that is accustomed to inspiring introspection in others and typically assumes a listening role. Themes that have surfaced from the survey and from interviews with facilitators are outlined in the sections that follow.⁸ The findings presented here represent the first phase in an ongoing cooperative inquiry research project that will continue via the Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub website where digital storytelling practitioners will be invited to continue this reflexive dialogue.

Digital Storytelling Tradition versus Experimentation

Foremost among the recurring themes that surfaced from this research is the challenge presented by the 3-day workshop format. This challenge manifests in three principal ways: First of all, facilitators – particularly those who apply digital storytelling to research projects (e.g., public health promotion) – often report difficulties around cultivating the time and space required to build the trust and rapport necessary to sharing highly personal stories. Secondly, the format limits time available to participants to develop a thoughtful, effective story “product”. Thirdly, while these challenges might suggest extending the format, facilitators also report difficulties around recruiting participants who can dedicate three consecutive days to this intensive process. My own experience confirmed that the time commitment required to participate in these workshops can present a challenge for working adults, and navigating the time commitment can be a very different proposition depending on whether a participant has flexibility and/or is compensated for time away from work. This is especially the case when recruiting socio-economically vulnerable populations – refugees or teen parents, for example.

⁸ All respondent quotes without citation information came from anonymous survey responses or from correspondence with interviewees who preferred to remain anonymous. In cases where quotes are attributed, interviewees preferred to be identified (vs. having pseudonyms assigned). This convention is intended to underscore and acknowledge the many voices that co-constructed this research.

In an effort to be more responsive to participants, some facilitators are experimenting with the workshop format – for example, holding “long-form workshops” that take place as a series of one-day workshops held over the course of several months, or holding one- or two-day workshops with stories centered around a single photo. While such modifications to the workshop format can help to overcome recruitment challenges, there remains the challenge of building trust among workshop participants and facilitators during the brief 3-day encounter. That said, my experience has been that facilitators are exceptionally skilled at building rapport and orchestrating a reflective space for digital storywork – despite the limited timeframe and in spite of the often unpredictable group dynamic. Thus, rather than being an objective assessment of their performance in this role, facilitators’ repeated expression of concern over building trust more likely reflects apprehensions they experience given their responsibility for managing the group dynamic.

There also appears to be hesitation among the digital storytelling community when it comes to experimenting with the StoryCenter “cookbook tradition” – a model that is seen as proven, and a touchstone for digital storytelling practice. One practitioner I interviewed outlined the challenge:

...what StoryCenter does best is...the facilitators create an affective learning environment that is supportive. ...They create a space where it's possible for people to feel comfortable sharing a story that they need to tell at that moment – even if it's not the story they planned to tell. And that's a real gift. And it's unique. As I've said, I've done a lot of this kind of work in other venues with other partners in other ways, but what kept me returning to the StoryCenter community of practice was the way that they value and sustain that level of community. And it's the thing honestly that I worry will get lost when people try to, I don't know, ramp up versions of it that can be more efficient. ...nowadays, so many people do work that's called digital storytelling because they're making digital stories – stories that are digital – but the movement...and I do think it is a movement...I think connects more to that affective learning experience – the sustainability dimension that I think you are researching (Brooke Hessler, personal communication, Sept 6, 2016).

Interestingly, StoryCenter’s Joe Lambert has also written about the limitations of the 3-day workshop model. In particular, he has expressed a desire to reshape the workshop process to allow for ongoing work with participant storytellers and opportunities for cultivating social agency and awareness. Lambert suggests, “we could shift our work to make it more explicitly about reviewing the pieces, and finding appropriate social contexts for sharing the work that would enliven the individuals and their communities to their potential for action” (Lambert 2009, 89). I come back to Lambert’s suggestion later in this paper.

In addition to adapting the workshop to shorter or longer formats, facilitators are also experimenting with the approach – especially in order to accommodate different competencies or cultural norms. For example, one respondent encourages participant storytellers

...to extend their creativity while holding onto fundamental principles of the [StoryCenter] model. ...[for example, by] supporting stories that do not contain a voiceover narrative, or narratives that follow a poetic structure as opposed to the circular structure of the [StoryCenter] model.

Another facilitator I spoke with builds more “relational time” into her work with Indigenous groups, providing additional opportunities for participants to come together through prayer and food to provide additional social and emotional support for participants (Ramona Beltrán, personal communication, Sept 21, 2016). Perhaps because such changes can be seamlessly incorporated into the workshop format and are congruent with the StoryCenter approach to honoring the storytelling participant, adaptive and “culturally-sensitive” modifications appear to be more widely implemented than are adjustments to the workshop duration or variations on the seven-step method.

Even so, this willingness to experiment may not translate as readily to the train-the-trainers situation – where experienced practitioners train members of a community to conduct and facilitate digital storytelling workshops in their own communities. One facilitator I spoke with described what sometimes happens in these situations. Written materials, i.e., books, articles, activities, and other instructional materials are intended to be a starting point, but:

Much of what we do we adapt to fit the specific needs, personalities, and cultures of the people in the room. In trying out a written activity during a recent training, problems arose, and a student said, ‘well it says here to do this...’ and we responded that in this case you'd want to adapt the activity to fit the group. Just because it says to do things one way in the body of the text, doesn't mean that the approach and content shouldn't be tweaked to fit each group and situation. ...And that's what I'd like them to be able to do (Anonymous DST Facilitator, personal communication, Sept 21, 2016).

Of course, such hesitancy on the part of facilitators-in-training may be better attributed to a lack of experience with digital storytelling practice rather than an unwillingness to improvise on the part of community facilitators. There is near-unanimous agreement among practitioners that digital storytelling facilitation skills improve with experience; even practiced facilitators deviate only modestly from the StoryCenter model. Perhaps the most innovative example I encountered was that of a facilitator who leverages digital storytelling to stimulate critical

reflection in her classroom. She contrasted her method with others who adapt digital storytelling to the educational setting:

...my colleagues who have been trained in the StoryCenter method...take say the 3-day workshop thing that they've experienced and the spread it out over a whole semester, so that at the end of the semester, the students' work culminates in the digital story. I really don't think that's a great idea. I don't think it's a bad idea, but I think there's some drawbacks to that. I think that a lot of the...for example, pitfalls in doing the project as this culminating thing that happens at the end...there's so much pressure – there's so much preciousness placed on the quality or the outcome of that one small video. And I think that students learn a lot by using media to take snapshots of their learning processes and by doing messy work upfront. So a lot of the work that I do involves having students make numerous digital stories. Not just one. Oftentimes I don't have them do one at the end of the semester at all (Brooke Hessler, personal communication, Sept 6, 2016).

These observations and reports suggest that facilitators value the StoryCenter 3-day workshop model and seven-step method as a framework for mediating the potentially unpredictable group process. This framework enables facilitators to focus on their responsibility to the storyteller participants – that of holding a space that fosters the trust necessary to supporting self-reflection and disclosure.

Transformation through Story

A second theme that carries through the literature and is confirmed by the survey and interview data involves the transformation that facilitators witness as a result of the digital storytelling process. From a technical standpoint, participants experience mastery through writing, producing and screening their digital stories. In educational contexts, digital storytelling has also been shown to foster multiliteracies, such as *design*, which “draws upon principles of both science and art to arrive at product that work and are pleasing” (Davis and Foley 2016, 322).

Ideologically, digital storytelling practitioners agree that the process fosters empowerment among participant storytellers (e.g., Beltrán, *et al.* 2014; Gray, *et al.* 2010; Gubrium, *et al.* 2016; Otañez and Lakota 2015). One respondent's memory of a *favorite moment* illustrates such empowerment: “at the end of a workshop with a group of First Nation peoples...one of the participants – a young woman – came up to me and said 'this has been the best three days of my life. I feel like I could do anything now!' That sentiment has since been repeated two or three times.” Another facilitator elaborated with the following story in our interview:

...there was a woman...who came into the workshop. She was very quiet – I think she was new to the organization where she was receiving services and...she didn't seem to know anyone. ...You could just tell throughout that workshop – as she

went through the story circle, talked with the other women in the workshop, produced her story – that she had gained a lot of confidence through that process. ...was able to connect with other people and really became much more a part of the organization where she was receiving services... she became an active member in strategic communications activities, really became an engaged activist...she changed her major in school. ...something like digital storytelling can really change people (Anonymous DST Facilitator, personal communication, Sept. 15, 2016).

In a recent article, Gubrium, *et al.* found that, among the young Puerto Rican women in their study, digital storytelling promoted resilience and efficacy, and further noted that participants “described a sense of accomplishment, pride, and value from participating in the...workshop” (2016, 11). Survey respondents likewise observed that participant storytellers experience a sense of pride. As one survey respondent described:

[it's] about creating the space for people who might not typically [be] valued for what they have to say. Hearing feedback in this context in terms of the importance of telling a story – possibly for the first time – and the resulting sense of pride was very powerful.

Indeed, facilitators consistently attribute transformation to the importance of privileging the participant's voice, and to providing a platform for sharing the storyteller's perspective. As another respondent shared, “Some of the most rewarding moments have been at [public] receptions where participants that may have been shy at the beginning are standing by their work, proudly discussing it with people they may not otherwise interact with.”

In light of these reports, it is no wonder that many facilitators who participated in this research observed that storytellers experience catharsis and healing through the workshop process. In general, facilitators refer to positive effects including *emotional acceptance*, *well-being* and *self-awareness* in describing these transformations. As one survey respondent noted, “the vast majority of our storytellers find the process hugely beneficial, describing the creation of their stories as 'therapeutic' and/or 'cathartic'.” And, in their wide-ranging review of the scholarship related to digital storytelling Davis and Foley conclude:

*At its core, it may be the **transformative potential** of digital storytelling for individuals and groups who participate in it seeking to understand themselves and to make sense of their experiences, especially experiences of dealing with hardships and obstacles, that will persevere and remain at the heart of the practice. Although we have not found articles about its specific use in narrative therapy, its therapeutic potential has been attested to by many (Davis & Weinshenker, 2012; Lambert, 2013) (emphasis added; 2016, 335-36).*

In addition to the transformative experiences for participant storytellers, the digital stories produced are likewise seen as mechanisms for audience transformation. Respondents and interviewees report how digital stories have been used to bridge understanding between groups with dissimilar perspectives, values or norms. In this respect, transformation is seen to take the form of a shift in perspective. As one respondent put it, “digital storytelling is a wonderful way of getting to know each other, across differences.” Facilitators also point to digital stories as vehicles for counter-storytelling – or challenging dominant notions that can give rise to stigma or stereo-typing. The intent, as one facilitator shared in our interview, is to talk about *truths* – “there’s not one truth. There are multiple truths. ...what are the implications for accepting one truth and not some other truth?” (Walter Jacobs, personal communication, Aug 28, 2016).

Within groups, digital stories also have a role in community-building, as well as in promoting solidarity – for example, sparking conversation among groups with shared concerns. The literature and research data corroborate that digital storytellers often perceive that their stories have value in that they might benefit others through the telling. In the study cited above, the authors noted “a strong desire by participants to tell their own stories, or make sense of their stories, not only for their own benefit, but for the benefit of others. Participants wanted other young people to ‘know they are not alone’ or to communicate a shared story” (Gubrium, *et al.* 2016, 11). A survey respondent who applies digital storytelling in healthcare improvement efforts made a similar observation: “we see that storytellers benefit greatly for the opportunity to share their stories and be listened to, hoping that their story will make a difference to someone else’s care...” And, reflecting on the potential to unite the storyteller and audience through story, one facilitator I interviewed had the following observation:

...for some people the story is exactly what they needed to hear in that moment in time, or it gave them words to express something they always felt but never could say out loud. ...People say things like, “that story might save somebody’s life.” Or...“that’s my story – that’s exactly how I feel. I can’t believe somebody all the way across the world feels exactly like that!” ...it doesn’t isolate you...[digital storytelling] illuminates this way that we have these global shared experiences too (Ramona Beltrán, personal communication, Sept 21, 2016).

Given their potential to resonate with audiences, digital stories are also considered to have broader impacts in terms of policy and social change, and several practitioners are exploring this in their published works (e.g., Alexandra 2015; Dreher 2012; Otañez and Guerrero 2015; Poletti 2011). One respondent observed this to be a natural next step:

...we realized that people were picking up and passing around the stories created for research purposes, and that it was starting to reach decision-makers. At that

point, we made a concerted effort to start sharing the stories more broadly with specific focus on connecting with policy folks.

For similar reasons, researchers are employing digital storytelling in public health promotion efforts, leveraging the transformative potential to inspire behavior change among target populations (e.g., Briant, *et al.* 2016; Cueva, *et al.* 2016; Gray, *et al.* 2010; Gubrium 2009; Gubrium, *et al.* 2016; Njeru, *et al.* 2015; Otañez and Guerrero 2015). Several survey respondents pointed to such applications, including using digital storytelling as an “outreach tool for community health educators.” My own participation as a co-facilitator in the *Positive Stories* workshop convinced me of powerful applications along these lines. Both HIV positive women and their case workers participated in the workshop, sharing, creating and screening their stories side-by-side. It surprised me to witness how the workshop process blurred the usual boundaries between “case workers” and “clients” as the women shared their stories in the circle. Their stories reflected a shared understanding of struggle, of stigma, of picking up the pieces following diagnosis – and of hope. Beyond the workshop itself, these stories will be developed into an educational guide – a toolkit – that will be available to organizations working to support HIV positive women. The role of audience in shaping digital stories will be further considered below.

The Facilitator’s Role in Surfacing Story

In terms of talking about their role, there is a perception among facilitators that participants’ stories are *latent*. In describing the facilitation process, digital storytelling practitioners consistently use language that suggests that their role is to bring the story from the private into the public sphere.⁹ Facilitators talk about *finding, drawing out, surfacing, or helping a story to emerge*. Certainly, in the *public* sense, these stories do indeed come to exist through their performance in the digital storytelling workshop setting, which offers an opportunity to socialize an experience through story, allowing participants an opportunity to engage in meaning-making with the backdrop of peers or community. Related to this, there appears to be a shared belief that these are stories the storyteller *wants* to tell, but is struggling to articulate. In fact, in the literature and in interviews, the facilitators often self-identify as “midwives”. A story from the survey articulates this theme exceptionally well:

A woman came in totally prepared to tell the story of her friend who had done amazing work. We encouraged her to find herself in that story or to tell another of work that she

⁹ In writing about story more generally, Michael Jackson makes a similar public/private distinction when describing the healing power of storytelling: “in bridging the gap between private and public realms, storytelling enables the regeneration and celebration of social existence, without which we are nothing” (Jackson 2002, 58-59).

had done. When it came time to story circle, she opened with talking all about her friend. Then she paused. And looked up at the ceiling. And no one said anything. One, two, three, four, five... Then she said "Or there's this other story." One that she had never told anyone. One about her and a time she felt she had failed.

It resulted in a powerful and poignant piece. And it only happened because no one in the story circle spoke in those long moments of silence. Because everyone was actively listening and could see and hear and feel, that she was not done....that something was coming. And it need the space to be born. And we all gave her that space.

The facilitator's role is to challenge the storyteller to dig deep for the story – to reflect on its meaning and consider why *this* story and why tell it *now*? Notably, 89% of survey respondents agreed¹⁰ that: *In addition to facilitating story crafting (technique), the digital practitioner has a role in facilitating meaning-making, such as through self-reflection and deconstruction with a trusted partner.* A respondent who strongly agreed with this statement illustrated with an example:

...in facilitating [a digital storytelling] workshop for prison inmates, their original stories can come out self-defeating. Through drawing them out, I help them think outside their box because the goal isn't just to tell a story but to bring hope, reframe mindset, press in alternate meaning to experiences, help them dream again.

Another respondent described his role as: “facilitating storytellers to be courageously honest about the stories they tell, possibly in a way or to an extent that they might not have reached on their own, independently.” And, as another interviewee explained, “the purpose of being there is to support people in telling stories. And sometimes the process of telling their story means investigating – pushing a bit for peoples’ motivations and what they learned from things” (Pam Sykes, personal communication, Sept 1, 2016). A survey respondent similarly observed, “agency and externalization of these stories is really a meaning making process for people. They're understanding their stories and, in that, they're understanding themselves.” My own experience in that first digital storytelling workshop supports these comments. The following are excerpts from my field notes:

In drafting my story script, I was not prepared for what I would uncover as I dug out old letters, photos and keepsakes in the context of telling my story. I found it difficult to not re-live but re-learn aspects of my story that were no longer “part” of the story I've been telling myself. It was as if I had selectively remembered and edited – and not always in positive ways....

...I found the voice recording process surprisingly enjoyable and cathartic. I had expected to have trouble recording without crying but, by the second day of the

¹⁰ 63% “strongly agreed” with this statement.

workshop, I had gained some distance from my story and was able to focus on how I wanted to tell (perform) the story.

...I was surprised to note that pairing some of the images with my narration gave me a new perspective on my relationship to the people in my story. I had understood my story to be about me and my aunt, but the images I selected pointed to another story – a similar bond between our daughters.

All the while the facilitator must hold a space where the participants feel safe to disclose and receive feedback from supportive peers. The facilitator's ability to hold this intimate, listening space is significant and influences what a storyteller is able to reveal. Helen Simondson writes, "Our challenge as facilitators of digital storytelling is to create an environment for participants that evokes memory and engages the sense, intellect, spirit, and heart and at the same time sparks curiosity and imagination" (2009, 123). In other words, so much of digital storytelling is what takes place in the workshop process – in the relationships between the facilitator, the storytellers and the story circle. As one interviewee put it:

...the way people help each other in a workshop, I think, is at least half of what goes into this work. It's not just listening with your ears and brain, but listening with your heart. And responding in kind. And opening yourself up to the vulnerability of receiving input, and accepting suggestions and help, or even a hug from somebody else (Anonymous DST Facilitator, personal communication, Sept 21, 2016).

Undoubtedly, the story circle plays a pivotal role in the process. Alan Davis frames the story circle's role as one of interpretation and co-authorship: "our stories evolve in interaction with others whose words and actions position us and assert interpretations to which we respond" (Holquist 2002, cited in Davis 2004). Certainly this fits with narrative theory. Marshall Ganz, a Harvard lecturer who brings a public narrative approach to social change efforts, explains:

Because story telling is a social transaction, we engage our listener's memories as well as our own as we learn to adapt our story of self in response to feedback so the communication is successful. Similarly, like the response to the Yiddish riddle that asks who discovered water: "I don't know, but it wasn't a fish." The other person often can "connect the dots" that we may not have connected because we are so within our own story that we have not learned to articulate them (2008, n.p.).

This corresponds with my own observations as a story circle participant at the facilitators' training; I recorded the following in my field notes from the facilitators' training:

...the questions from the story circle participants helped to reveal what was missing or unclear in a given story. These sometimes naïve questions illuminated what other participants heard and understood; when they shared what resonated with them, it helped the teller to consider why that might be, and whether there

might be something to be gained by exploring that aspect of their story more deeply. This collaborative and generative aspect of the story circle surprised me again – as it did at the 3-day workshop – and caused me to think about the value of the facilitator's role in fostering/holding this space.

Indeed, the experience is contingent upon the facilitator's skill in holding a space where the storyteller feels heard and able to take advantage of the rare opportunity to participate in self-reflection and the crafting the narrative. One facilitator I spoke with described her work as that of “making the space where people can hold that level of emotion without either backing away from it or falling into it...that's the balance” (Pam Sykes, personal communication, Sept 1, 2016). Another framed it this way:

...particularly when working with somebody who's telling a complicated or an emotionally difficult story, they're gonna tell you the version they choose to tell you or that they're comfortable telling you, or that they think you're ready for. The one that you are ready to handle. And so that's totally their prerogative. It's their story. But, if you're [facilitating a workshop] you want to get the version of the story that they want to tell. Not necessarily the story that they're shaping to be more acceptable and more comfortable for you. ...And so in digital storytelling, it's a delicate balance between wanting to honor the version of the story that somebody is comfortable telling and then the story that they're only telling as a way to protect you from feeling pain or anguish...over their story (Brooke Hessler, personal communication, Sept 6, 2016).

At the same time, nearly all of the facilitators I spoke with also raised the issue of the “untellable” story – or trauma narrative¹¹ – and their ethical responsibility to connect storytellers with professional help and, in some cases, to encourage the participant to choose a different story. One interviewee described the dilemma this way: “another thing that comes up...is how to recognize where to draw the line between helping folks process their stories in a way to make a better story and not go into therapy” (Walter Jacobs, personal communication, Aug 28, 2016). Another interviewee shared a story to illustrate her experience with this issue:

...the story kind of came up quite smoothly in the story circle, and then the participant couldn't write it. It just completely stalled in the script-writing phase. And we tried all sorts of things. We tried framing it as a letter...and basically [unintelligible] much smaller segments of the story. We did it. But I was speaking afterward to a friend who is actually a therapist and she said, “but that's just trauma. That's a trauma narrative – there's no narrative in trauma.” It was like this big lightbulb went on. And I hadn't known enough about the psychological processes of trauma to recognize that's what was going on. ...as much as we're not

¹¹ See, for example, the presentation by Dr. Rebecca Campbell (Professor of Community Psychology and Program Evaluation at Michigan State University) discussing the neurobiology of trauma for insights into the biological basis for trauma narratives: <http://tinyurl.com/grfw6ep>.

therapists, we're often having to deal with the same processes. And so that was very useful for me to kind of know that if the story is stuck like that, move on to something else (Pam Sykes, personal communication, Sept 1, 2016).

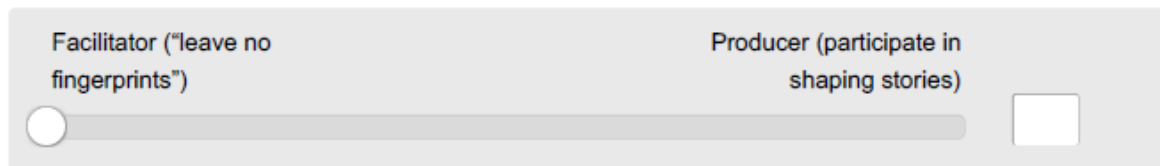
While several of the digital storytelling practitioners I encountered have social work backgrounds, all recognize the need to partner with mental health professionals in instances where a participant storyteller requires more support than the facilitators can provide. Gubrium, *et al.* list this concern among the ethical considerations in digital storytelling practice and recommend pre-screening of potential participants as well as “having on-hand elders, social workers, or other professionals who are trained to help with emotional work” (2014, 1609).

Thus, the digital storytelling process is emergent – giving rise to new meanings – with facilitators orchestrating the dynamic conditions that encourage intimacy, disclosure, deep listening and open, respectful communication.

Leave no Fingerprints

Related to the facilitator’s role in surfacing story, there is also a heightened concern around ethics and transparency in this collaborative work. Specifically, there is a tension between the “ideal” of leaving no fingerprints on a digital story and the facilitator’s active participation in co-authorship. Responses varied widely to the following survey question:

* 5. In terms of the digital storytelling process, how do you view your role on the following scale?



On a scale of 1 (leave no fingerprints) to 100 (participate in shaping stories), responses ranged from 4 to 100 (mean: 41.67 / median: 41 / mode: 50). Representative quotes from the survey include:

The storyteller's voice should absolutely be honored and preserved. (scale value:4)

It's impossible to remove yourself as a facilitator. Your skills, advice, and techniques will be present in the final work, because most participants need that extra help/push to produce their stories. I'm no longer afraid of that or try to deny that. I think it's beautiful to truly collaborate, and I love lending my skills and sensibilities to help others. It's still their life, their words, their images... I am just there to help preserve and help produce these stories. (scale value:30)

It is impossible to not leave fingerprints, and I at times will suggest shots or ways to visually communicate the story; I want the story to be as powerful as the participant wishes. I do not suggest changes to the stories itself... (scale value:33)
This respondent elaborated in our interview: *I think in terms of the role of the facilitator – it's not trying to change what the storyteller is communicating, just helping that visual be more attractive and, in that sense, I think it can help it be more compelling.*

As much as I believe that I shouldn't interfere to push someone else's story in a direction that serves me, rather than them - the "leave no fingerprints" goal can be a bit naive. Of course everything from my choice of sample stories through how I advise on script editing to my personal style as a facilitator is going to influence the stories - and very often it's precisely my expertise that people want. I am both a facilitator AND a teacher, and if I abdicate my responsibility as a teacher of new skills that's failing my participants just as much as misuse of my power to influence their stories. This is a continual balancing act that requires a lot of conscious self-reflection. (scale value:51)

As a feminist, as someone with a background in adult education and documentary film, I find it irresponsible and disingenuous to say that someone in a position of power can "leave no fingerprints." (scale value:100)

Likewise, in the interviews, facilitators expressed concern about having influence over the participant's story. For example, one interviewee noted:

So for me it's the art of language that is so captivating...and sometimes people say something in these stories that sticks with me forever. Just the turn of a phrase stays with me and makes me think, "damn, I wish I had thought to say something like that myself." Or there's so much beauty in assembling those words in that particular way; or the concepts that are colliding in that sentence are so profound. There's something so beautiful in that to me. ...It's art. It's as much art as anything else. ...I want people to get to that spot in a way that feels right for themselves. I want their phrases to be theirs, not mine. I don't want to put words into their mouths. If it isn't authentic, the power and the beauty—the art—is lost (Anonymous DST Facilitator, personal communication, Sept 21, 2016).

Notably, respondents to the survey consistently cited such instances – i.e., where they or a co-facilitator were perceived as encroaching on the story – as “least favorite moments” as digital storytelling facilitators. For example, one survey respondent shared, “Just recently a woman who was in a group I co-facilitated a couple of years ago told me that she still loves the story she made. But it really shook me when she said, ‘the ending is in your words. Not mine’.” Another respondent related the following least favorite moment: “When I worked with someone (co-facilitator) who I respected but felt they were putting their finger prints on a story too heavily. I had to figure out a way to express this without disrupting the workshop.”

Certainly, there is a power dynamic established between the facilitator and the storytelling participant, even as the storyteller is clearly seen as the author and therefore taken to be the authority when it comes to his or her story. As one facilitator I spoke with put it:

I understand why certain facilitators say, leave no fingerprints. I think what they're wanting to say is they want to value that person's story and that it's their story and that they're the author of it. I think I understand the impetus of where that comes from. And I want to be generous with that impetus and say that I think it comes from people really wanting, as I said to respect the author's story. But I just think that they need to be honest about the power that they have in the workshop setting. And they need to recognize that they are in a position of power, that they are the workshop facilitator, that their words will be held to a different [standard] (Darcy Alexandra, personal communication, Sept 9, 2016).

Moreover, in cases of storywork with marginalized groups, issues of class and privilege can further influence the power dynamic in the workshop setting. Perhaps in deference to this dynamic, many facilitators suggest *humility*¹² in approaching digital storytelling practice:

...I use a lot of my own examples, which also helps. "So...here's my example first" – and to kind of put people at ease – you know, I share some of the things I messed up at. You know I'm not perfect. ...And I think that kind of helps the participants also open up a little bit (Walter Jacobs, personal communication, Aug 28, 2016).

Other facilitators explicitly recognize their positionality – for example, one survey respondent observed, "The risk of co-authoring, to me, is in deciding for someone else what is important to tell. I don't want that power, and I don't feel qualified to speak for another person in that way." Interestingly, another facilitator recounted an instance where participant storytellers challenged the power dynamic:

I was very conscious of my power as the white/urban/English/technically skilled facilitator and worried that [workshop participants] wouldn't feel safe to challenge me. But one woman watched her draft story through with me, then told me I'd got the images wrong here and here, and took me outside to help her re-shoot the images she wanted.

In our interview, she went on to reflect on this experience:

Women who could have felt very over-awed by me, totally owned that [workshop] space. I mean, as a group, they developed their own dynamic, they handled their own stuff and they were able to support each other in a way that quite neatly and

¹² While *cultural competence* is the dominant discourse among those in academic and traditional public health arenas, I use *humility* – a term that facilitators consistently use to describe their approach and positionality relative to participant storytellers. Humility also shifts the focus to practice as *behavior* rather than as a skill set that defines competence. Humility is considered at length below (see: *Bringing a Cultural Lens to Digital Storytelling Practice*).

quite beautifully sidelined me. So they were able to create a dynamic that drew on me as a resource (Pam Sykes, personal communication, Sept 1, 2016).

And yet, despite the ideal of leaving no fingerprints, many facilitators also recognize the value of this co-creative space. It is collaborative work that is also interpersonal and about identity, as well as negotiation between self and other. As one facilitator I spoke with put it, “the dialogical, inter-subjective aspect of digital storytelling is its strength, it is what differentiates it from other ‘collaborative’ forms” (Darcy Alexandra, personal communication, Sept 9, 2016). This collaboration is not only between the participant storyteller and the facilitator, but also includes the contributions of the other workshop participants. As another interviewee noted, “that process of negotiating and reworking the story changes the story. [Stories] almost always shift significantly between the story circle and the final product” (Pam Sykes, personal communication, Sept 1, 2016). And yet another facilitator made a similar observation: “...folks come to the story circle with an idea of what they’re going to make their story about and it changes. Sometimes dramatically. And it really depends on the level of vulnerability that they’re willing to share. And then also the process – the group process” (Ramona Beltrán, personal communication, Sept 21, 2016).

Given the perception among many respondents and interviewees that co-authorship is an inevitable component in this work, many who participated in this research define ethical practice in this co-productive process in terms of *transparency*. As one respondent framed it, “If co-authorship is a transparent process there is nothing wrong. It’s important that the storyteller feels the ownership of the story. In ethical terms it’s important that the story conveys the values of the storyteller and not of the facilitator.” Quoting Parker Palmer, another respondent defined her role as that of, “...‘creating a space in which the community of truth can be practiced’¹³ and to the extent that I can facilitate digital storytelling in that way, I believe in coauthorship.”

Facilitators consistently articulate a mindfulness and explicit practice that reveals this theme as an important point of tension for digital storytelling practitioners. The survey and interview data reflect a heightened awareness among facilitators that the storyteller’s authorship and agency are at stake when a facilitator steps in. And, while respondents differ on where to draw the line between “surfacing” and producing, they appear to agree on what constitutes failure in digital storytelling: a story that the teller no longer recognizes...perhaps not even the story s/he

¹³ “‘Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.’ Good teaching, whatever its form, will help more and more people learn to speak and listen in the community of truth, to understand that truth is not in the conclusions so much as in the process of conversation itself, that if you want to be ‘in truth’ you must be in the conversation” (Palmer 1990).

would have told. Such agreement suggests that facilitators recognize agency and *identity* are at stake in this co-creative work. Indeed, this insight – the importance of recognizing and preserving what is personally meaningful – can similarly and critically inform how we go about engaging in ethical partnerships with the communities and cultures where we work.

The Role of Audience

At the same time, we as the audience want to experience the transportive quality of story (Green and Brock 2000), and the facilitator also brings the artistic and technical expertise that obscures the crafting process in the artistry of the digital story. Opinions vary among facilitators as to how important the technical production quality is to the digital storytelling experience. For example, one respondent stated, “I’m less concerned with a visually stunning or technically perfect story than one that the participant is proud of and learns from.” Another example from the survey illustrates that facilitators who value the aesthetic still experience an ambivalence that reprises the “leave no fingerprints” debate:

A digital story is both a personal disclosure and a work of art. As a personal disclosure, it needs to be authentic and significant. As a work of art, it can be impactful or bland. As a facilitator, I want to attend to both. If I sense that the personal disclosure is inauthentic or insignificant, I want to nudge the storyteller to go deeper without embellishing their truth. If I recognize ways that the story lacks artistic impact, I want to lead the author back to techniques and examples that he or she can make use of. In short, I want the storyteller to own the story. But I want to assist them to tell it artfully.

Another facilitator I spoke with articulated a similar sentiment when describing an experience that has shaped her approach to facilitation:

I remember I felt so deflated at the end of my first workshop because my students were having these amazing insights and these incredible experiences and they had this knowledge and it was this tremendous thing. And then the story at the end, to me, just felt like this – and once again, the students were delighted with the stories – but I felt like the story itself was a very poor reflection of the actual experience. So, for me, valuing the practice and the process is a way of valuing the story and the storyteller. ... what I learned from that experience is that I wanted to make sure that I was providing participants with enough input around images and photographs and visual concepts and sound, so that they could create stories that I thought did justice to what they had first told me in the storytelling circle (Darcy Alexandra, personal communication, Sept 9, 2016).

Taken together, these examples point to the power of potential audiences to indirectly shape the digital story. In working to create the story, the storyteller wonders: Will my story be artful? Impactful? Do I have the skills to do justice to my story? These comments from facilitators

resonated for me, given my own experience in my first digital storytelling workshop. At the time I wondered how a hypothetical audience might receive my story. In my field notes, I observed: “as a non-artist participant, I felt that my story lacked an artistic/aesthetic quality. ...I believe I could have better conveyed my story visually and might have created a more impactful story if I had had more knowledge in terms of composition and design principles.” In fact, there is an ongoing debate among practitioners as to whether the value of digital storytelling lies in the story *product* or in the *process* of arriving at the story through the workshop experience (e.g., Gubrium *et al.* 2016; Love *et al.* 2011). In any event, and light of my own experience, it is clear that attention to the digital storytelling product signals the expectation of an audience.

In terms of audience, there is the workshop audience and there are other intended – perhaps absent – audiences that a storyteller calls to mind to structure the telling. The workshop audience is comprised of the facilitator(s) and participants who listen to the story during the story circle process and view the completed stories screened at the conclusion of the workshop. As a workshop participant, I was taken aback by how perceptive near-strangers could be – both in how they responded to my story (especially through insightful questions) and how I felt able to constructively contribute to their stories...even as an “outsider” to their experience. And, returning to the discussion of the story product, as a member of the workshop audience I was likewise surprised by the effect the digital story format had on my understanding of their stories; I noticed during the story screening that the photos, art, music and voiceover all worked together to add new dimensions and meaning to the stories I *thought* I had heard in the story circle. Moreover, it appeared to me that the final story product also served to document a further introspection that had taken place as each participant worked to bring these multi-media tools to the telling of his or her story.

Beyond the workshop, participant storytellers typically have an audience in mind, even if they are undecided on whether or not to share their stories. StoryCenter dedicates an entire section of its *Storyteller's Bill of Rights* to the sharing of stories outside the workshop setting (StoryCenter 2016). Given the highly personal nature of these stories, often the intended audience is friends or family. When digital storytelling is employed in community-building or health promotion efforts, the audience may be groups with shared concerns or lifestyles. Still other storytellers, who seek to shift perspectives or inspire social change, may share their stories in community forums or with policy-makers. In each instance, audience influences the story that is told, how it is told, and what can be shared without risk to the participant storyteller.

Along these lines, on World AIDS Day I had the opportunity to attend a public screening of the digital stories produced through the *Positive Stories* project, including those produced in the workshop I co-facilitated. Responses from the sold-out audience suggested that many in attendance were friends, family members and others affected by HIV; during the screening I heard murmurs of recognition, cheering, and call-and-response style remarks such as “that’s right now” and “praise the lord!” Later, questions posed to the storyteller panel during Q&A revealed another audience demographic: healthcare workers and those working for organizations that provide HIV programming, who probed for storytellers’ perspectives on how to better support HIV-positive clients in their care. Such dialogue is exciting in that it illustrates how digital storytelling can serve to privilege experiential knowledge.¹⁴ The storyteller panel spoke of feeling empowered by the *Positive Stories* project – “we’re bigger than our circumstances” – as well as the impact of seeing their stories on a big screen. A couple spoke about their reservations around sharing their stories, and every question posed by the audience began with a recognition of the storytellers’ bravery. Having participated in the workshop process, I knew that some participants had withheld their stories. Others permitted their stories to be shown but did not attend. Still others attended and screened their stories but did not participate on the dais with the panel. In terms of the stories themselves, there were instances where storytellers opted to blur the faces of the other people they featured. Others left out their last names from the story credits. In these ways, the stories – and, in some cases, their absence – neatly and beautifully captured how participants navigated the process of disclosure through story.

Which brings this discussion of audience to sponsored digital storytelling projects, where funders necessarily represent another intended audience as well as a stakeholder in the story. StoryCenter’s model seeks to give as much authorship as possible to the storyteller. And yet, as I learned in their facilitators’ training, funders often play an indirect role in shaping stories. As facilitators-in-training we found ourselves considering important questions, such as how to balance funders’ expectations (e.g., control over the story “product” and production value)¹⁵ while still honoring the participant’s story. This is a point of concern discussed in the digital storytelling literature (e.g., Dush 2013), and several survey respondents and interviewees raised

¹⁴ Observations reported here are informed by only one instance of observation at a public screening and may not be representative of a typical audience response. Future research along these lines would require more information on audience demographics as well as pre- and post-surveys to measure, for example, engagement, knowledge acquisition, and shifts in perspective or understanding.

¹⁵ And, another question beyond the scope of this research: Can funders also have an undue influence on a story by placing emphasis on *protecting* the individual storyteller?

this issue as well. For example the survey question, *What is your philosophy regarding the risk/value of co-authorship?* generated the following insight:

...risks and values are often determined by funders, which can add to pressures for co-production and can add challenges – especially with funders/organizers who are not familiar with the importance of the process and are skeptical of thinking in terms of process and not just outcomes (final product).

Another response to the same question raised similar concerns:

Most of our workshops are commissioned by healthcare organisations or educational institutions. It is our professional duty to provide a quality product for our clients just as much as it is our ethical duty to facilitate the stories that need to be told by the individual.

Tellingly, in both of these examples, facilitators perceived a shift in emphasis toward tangible outcomes – i.e., the digital story product. In the case of the *Positive Stories* workshop that I co-facilitated, we were fortunate that our funder did not insist stories include PSA-style messaging; we were free to simply prompt participants to tell a story reflecting their lived experience with HIV. Even so, I observed that the facilitation team experienced an intense pressure to deliver a story product. My co-facilitators – who were much more experienced than I and shouldered the responsibility for the workshop's success – clearly exhibited anxiety over ensuring that every participant completed her digital story. While I had observed a similar, hectic push to finish our stories in the public workshop and in the facilitator's training, the grant-funded workshop was the first where I observed that the workshop's success seemed to hinge upon getting every participant to a final product.¹⁶ In such cases, tech-savvy facilitators often feel the pressure to step in and move production along, leaving well-intentioned fingerprints in the process. A selection of survey responses helps set the scene:

There are occasional instances where workshop participants lose the sense that they will be able to successfully reach the level of quality they are shooting for in their own story. Sometimes they finish the story anyway, but other times they end up either quitting or getting really discouraged.

Managing time always connects to my least favorite moments when I'm facilitating 3-day workshops. Recently when I was facilitating a workshop ...I told one participant who, on the third day, was utterly engrossed with his images but hadn't started editing, that he needed to begin editing. I was asking him to cut short an

¹⁶ It's possible that I was more attuned to this because it was my first time as an "insider" sharing the facilitation team's perspective; however, our commitment to produce outcomes for the funder weighed on our minds throughout the workshop process.

exciting, exploratory process but I also knew that if I didn't say anything he wouldn't finish by 1:30 in the afternoon when we had the final screening.

Thus, in their focus on outcomes, even non-prescriptive funders represent an audience that imprints upon and shapes the digital storytelling product.

In Search of Relevance & Sustainability

Digital storytelling has been shown to have broad applications. It has been used for promoting mental health (for example, overcoming historical trauma; Beltrán and Begun 2014), to inspire vernacular creativity (Burgess 2006), to engage citizens in public history projects (Klaebe *et al.* 2007), and to support community-building (e.g., through the sharing of local narratives; Willox *et al.* 2012), among other efforts. Even so, several of my respondents and interview subjects wondered about the sustainability of the digital storytelling genre.¹⁷ In particular, they were perplexed and dismayed that these stories do not “go viral” and several compared the relative obscurity of digital storytelling to more widely-recognized personal narrative formats, such as Story Corps. As one respondent observed, “the absence of digital storytelling in public media is striking”. And a respondent on staff with StoryCenter framed the challenge this way:

Our stories aren't flashy enough to really become "viral" and watched on social media – at least not as much as we would've hoped. But we also don't want to make them sensationalistic. It really still is that population that wants depth that's going to be attracted to listening to them deeply...but how to engage those that don't often do that in this practice?

Such comments suggest a perceived rift between story products that have broad public appeal and those that foster intimacy.

Practitioners also wonder why storytelling participants seldom continue to produce digital stories on their own following their workshop experience. As one interviewee put it, “a surprisingly small percentage of people who go through a three-day workshop continue to make digital stories. The people like the process and like doing it, but it doesn’t really stick in the sense of ‘this is something that I want to keep doing’” (Jim Winship, personal communication, Aug 24, 2016). A survey respondent speculated on why this might be:

...I think a lot of times what happens is the participants leave a workshop with their story and then kind of forget about it. Maybe not "forget", but not know how to

¹⁷ Jean Burgess characterizes the workshop-based digital storytelling process as a media form as well as a cultural practice. Moreover, Burgess writes, “[d]igital storytelling as a ‘movement’ is explicitly designed to amplify the ordinary voice. It aims not only to remediate vernacular creativity but also to *legitimate* it as a relatively *autonomous* and worthwhile contribution to public culture. This marks it as an important departure from even the most empathetic ‘social documentary’ traditions” (2006).

maybe tell another story. Maybe we could give them some "after the workshop" writing prompts that they can look at and work on after the workshop. I think most participants don't remember how to do the tech part of the digital storytelling...

Whatever the reason, this fits with my own observation as a participant storyteller. Despite the personally meaningful and transformative nature of my workshop experiences, the two subsequent digital stories I've produced outside of workshops have been for academic purposes related to this project – or in order to practice the technical skills that enable me to co-facilitate – rather than for the purpose of more intimate reflection that characterizes proper digital storytelling. Such observations point to some emergent quality intrinsic to the facilitated group process that defines the digital storytelling genre and sets it apart from the digital story product alone.

Along with seeking to establish a foothold for the genre, practitioners are likewise striving for solidarity. Respondents and interviewees often refer to their digital storytelling colleagues as a “community” and consistently express a desire for additional ways to connect with one another – for example, through shared platforms, searchable digital story databases and team-based collaborative projects. As one interviewee put it, “we’re such a tiny, niche community that we have to sort of help each other out” (Pam Sykes, personal communication, Sept 1, 2016). As mentioned above, more than 550 practitioners are members of the DS Working Group social network where they share advice; however, according to the survey and interview data a demand for more robust interactions and engagement opportunities persists among this community of practice. This sort of interaction typically takes place at conferences, such as the biennial International Digital Storytelling Conference, organized by StoryCenter (Center for Digital Storytelling) in previous years; the most recent in the series was held in 2015 (Center for Digital Storytelling 2016). An upcoming event – *Un/told: An Un/Conference about Digital Storytelling* – will be held in the UK in July, 2017 and is billed as an informal continuation of the series. *Un/Told* will provide a venue for participants to “creatively explore and interrogate issues arising in digital storytelling practice and theory” with the aim of encouraging “cross-fertilisation between disciplines and approaches” (University of East London 2016). True to the co-creative nature of digital storytelling, *Un/Told* will involve participants in shaping the (un)conference content and program design.

Meanwhile, practitioners are seeking ways to demonstrate the relevance and value of digital storytelling. Applications along these lines include its use in community-based participatory research (e.g., Willox *et al.* 2012) and related participatory action research (e.g., Spurgeon *et al.* 2009), public health research and health promotion messaging development (e.g., Njeru *et al.*

2015), reflection-in-practice (e.g., Freidus and Hlubinka 2002), as well as for program evaluation (e.g., Gubrium *et al.* 2016) and planning (e.g., Klæbe, *et al.* 2007). In terms of recommendations for future research, respondents and interviewees alike express an interest in exploring the longer-term impacts of digital storytelling – i.e., What happens after this intimate group process? What is the life of the story beyond the workshop, and how does this process impact the storyteller's relationship to the story?

Discussion and Recommendations

The themes elicited from the survey and interviews demonstrate constant self-reflection on the part of facilitators: *What does it mean to participate in this humbling, inspiring, transformative process?* The sections that follow explore how practitioners can further “facilitate community” through digital storytelling practice (*Bringing a Cultural Lens to Digital Storytelling Practice*), and consider digital storytelling as a method for alternative knowledge production and a means of working with communities in an ethical manner that promotes cultural sustainability goals (*Bringing Digital Storytelling to Cultural Sustainability Practice*).

Bringing a Cultural Lens to Digital Storytelling Practice

As increasingly recognized in the digital storytelling literature – and as reflected in these survey and interview data – the StoryCenter model provides a framework for orchestrating circumstances that support self-reflection and disclosure. The model is revered both for its success and for its portability. And while practitioners envision near-limitless applications for digital storytelling, they generally hesitate to assume they might improve upon its demonstrated success. Even so, these findings suggest that, far from being a prescriptive method (i.e., formula), there is flexibility within the framework. Thus, the art of digital storytelling practice is in how facilitators behave in the space the framework makes possible. On the one hand, facilitators are the experts when it comes to the digital storytelling *process*, and they must set boundaries that frame the supportive environment for this work. Yet, as I learned from a facilitator when I participated in my first public workshop, I am the expert when it comes to my story. At the time, it was an empowering reminder and I experienced our interaction as a gift that privileged my story. Backstage, in the facilitators' training, we learned that this is a technique intended to “level the playing field” and support agency on the part of the storyteller. In other words, it's not enough for facilitators to be mindful of power dynamics but they must also take responsibility for seeking ways to disrupt that dynamic, when possible. Recalling this encounter causes me to wonder what more facilitators might say – and how might we behave –

in order to demonstrate humility, as well as an openness to working at interrupting cycles that contribute to the facilitator/participant power dynamic? In this section I outline four recommendations for unpacking this concept of humility and further integrating this intention into the digital storytelling approach.

The first recommendation relates to the facilitator's intention. In addition to approaching this work with an attitude of humility, findings from this study suggest that *vulnerability* – the same vulnerability we expect from participants when we hold this space – represents the other side of the humility coin. In other words, in addition to humility, there is a need for facilitators to share in experiencing vulnerability alongside participant storytellers. One way facilitators can accomplish this is by sharing their own stories. In the public workshop, I observed this occurs in a teaching context when facilitators use their own digital stories (or parts of them) to illustrate design principles, for example. However, facilitators do not take part in disclosing (new) stories in the story circle process. The result is an implied hierarchy between the facilitator and the storyteller; the facilitator's role is to listen and advise without participating with the group in feeling vulnerable. One might argue that this distance enables the facilitator to focus on holding space for participants; however, my experience as a participant observer in the facilitators' training suggests this precaution may be unfounded. In comparison to the public workshop, I noticed at the facilitators' training that experienced facilitators shared revealing stories of false starts, lessons learned, embarrassing moments, etc. These disclosures, along with the use of inclusive language by experienced facilitators (e.g., "we" and "our") in talking about facilitation practice, served to establish *us* – facilitators – as a peer group. And despite my intention going into that training to focus on building my skillset as a facilitator, my experience was every bit as transformative as it was in my first public workshop. The following is an excerpt from a digital story I produced some time later, reflecting on that experience:

At this training, we were expected to make another digital story. This time I was determined to choose a tale that wasn't so wrenching. I hoped to free myself from this deeply emotional work that caused me to forget my pen and notebook. And yet, in that setting, surrounded by supportive listeners, the story that surfaced surprised me, challenged me, insisted I engage with truths that go unexamined from day to day. In those four days, I understood something of the art of holding this space, and how difficult it can be – for facilitators and storytellers alike – to put ego aside and allow stories to emerge.

As this reflection reveals, the storywork space was not compromised when facilitators engaged more fully in the experience along with "participants." Thus, I suggest incorporating such

“expressions of vulnerability and exposure” (Bliss 2015, 226) into our approach is one way in which facilitators might act to intentionally shift power dynamics in this process.

Related to this first recommendation, findings from this study also suggest that, in working with community groups or cultures other than our own, it is essential that we consider our positionality and ask, *Who am I being in this work?* This recommendation is best introduced by the facilitator whose position on this issue resonated for me. Drawing on her experience working with communities of color, Dr. Ramona Beltrán who self-identifies as Indigenous Chicana noted, “optimally, these projects are led and facilitated by, or at least co-facilitated by people who can reflect some kind of shared cultural experience.” When that’s not possible, she recommends preparation through self-study prior to working with communities of color, as well as “extreme humility” in approaching this work:

...part of what that means is doing a whole different body of work outside of digital storytelling that prepares you for working with groups that are not your own. ...looking at one’s own cultural identity and how power, privilege, oppression, live within the multiple spaces of your identity. And how that might come into contact with other peoples’ identities. ...once we have a good idea of our own intersectional identities... we are better equipped to enter spaces with a true sense of humility and transparency as outsiders.

...I think the most effective ways of working with groups other than one’s own is to come in saying, “I don’t know anything. ...I don’t expect you to teach me, but I’m willing to learn and I’m willing to hold this space. And I may make mistakes and if I do, please let me know.” As somebody who’s white, and an outsider to an indigenous group or a community of color, I think it’s really important to go in with prior experience and education in working with other groups¹⁸ in terms of exploring, what does it mean to disrupt that privilege, what does it mean to disrupt the power? And how can you build relationships in a way that people will trust you? ...It’s complicated, but I think that the more that you have those kinds of skills, the better off one will be going into a group that’s not your own (Ramona Beltrán, personal communication, Sept 21, 2016).

I have quoted this excerpt from our interview at length given Beltrán’s approach to digital storytelling illustrates the distinction between work *in* community and work *with* community – a *way of being in this work* that is consistent with cultural sustainability practice. By working in this way – *with* community – facilitators further extend their vulnerability by recognizing their positionality as well as the assumptions they may bring to this work.

¹⁸ She recommends, for example, working either as a student in multicultural/crosscultural education and/or working with groups committed to exploring issues of social justice, such as Standing Up for Racial Justice, an organization that focuses on anti-oppression for white people who want to work in racial justice.

Shifting to a more provocative recommendation, findings from this study suggest that a more hands-on facilitation approach – rather than the “leave no fingerprints” ideal – may better serve the storyteller in some cases. To support this assertion, I draw on my experience of sharing my own digital stories with a limited audience, as well as my observations at the *Positive Stories* screening. Specifically, I noticed that *outside of the workshop setting* digital stories seem to derive their power from their ability to resonate – that is, the story has relevance and meaning for the audience, independent of the teller. Undoubtedly, it is difficult to anticipate what will resonate, or the different relevant values and experiences an audience will bring. In the digital storytelling workshop, that relevance is co-constructed through the intimate process of collaborative storywork – of witnessing the birth of the story and reflecting with the teller in that emergent space. Beyond the workshop setting, there remains the question of being not only heard, but *understood*. In contrast to my screening experience in the digital storytelling workshops, I found that other audiences’ reactions to my story varied. Audiences that were able to relate to my story (e.g., friends, family or – in the case of a digital story I created to reflect on my research process – fellow social scientists) responded more akin to my fellow workshop participants – that is, I observed¹⁹ more intimate, emotional responses. In contrast, the reactions of unrelated or “objective others” were typically more reserved, inspiring more superficial or inquisitive responses, such as curiosity about content or technical aspects of the story production. This suggests to me that the “leave no fingerprints” approach (e.g., of the sort practiced in public workshops) may be best suited to facilitating digital stories that will be shared – or used to foster dialogue – between and among groups with shared interests, experiences or points of concern.

On the other hand, digital storytellers often conceive of their stories as a means to inform wider audiences – for instance, to counter stereotypes and to hold economic and political leaders accountable for a storyteller’s lived experience (e.g., Otañez and Guerrero 2015). Yet, even as digital storytelling holds the promise for amplifying voice, there is an expectation that the intended audience will be present and bear witness. In her forthcoming article, Jo Tacchi identifies a discrepancy between the process of digital storytelling – “allowing people a space to express opinions and share experiences” – and the value of “ensuring voices are heard in the places and spaces where they might influence decision makers” (forthcoming, 7). Other practitioners are likewise considering the impact of listening (e.g., Alexandra 2015; Dreher

¹⁹ In a few instances, people viewed the link to my digital story when I was not present and reported their reactions after the fact.

2012) and social scientists have written about the consequences of *inattentive* listening on identity formation – “clearly, how others listen to us may matter quite a bit” (Pasupathi and Rich 2005, 1079). Thus, in cases where digital storytelling is to be used for advocacy – or if it is intended as a communication tool to shift perceptions, challenge understandings and persuade across ideological or cultural divides – facilitators may better serve the storyteller by providing additional guidance on how to structure their stories to be relevant to the intended audience.

This is not to say that digital stories cannot persuade when there is no common understanding, but I would argue that their potential for impact will fall short – i.e., fail to resonate – if the stories are not relatable. Admittedly, a story oftentimes resonates simply through its ability to inspire empathy. However, as narrative researcher Amy Shuman has noted, “empathy preserves a distance between those who understand and those who experience” (2005, 145) whereas *transformative* stories “simultaneously transform both speaker and audience as they create both self-understanding and the possibility of someone else who understands” (ibid. 118). Amy Hill, founder and director of the digital storytelling initiative *Silence Speaks*, has likewise considered this dynamic. In her chapter discussing the application of digital storytelling to gender justice efforts, Hill asks “What potential exists for [digital stories] on their own to catalyze concerned action, and on what basis are people expected to act? ...What is the relationship between watching stories that make viewers feel empathetic and connected to others and social engagement?” (2010, 133). Narrative researcher Andreea Ritivoi makes a related point that narratives that aspire to promote understanding must bring “an entirely novel situation within our horizon of experience while also prompting a revision of what we have come to expect based on our experiences” (2016, 59). Ritivoi further suggests that for narratives to more effectively inspire action, “they need to include narrative techniques that intensify the emotional projection of readers into the situations they are reading about, by explicitly relating them to the characters featured in those situations” (ibid. 71). In other words, if a story is to provoke “expanded consciousness” it must aspire beyond empathy. The alternative is that digital storytelling may reinforce an unintended consequence among our audiences, where “the expression, or merely the identification, of the personal gets mistaken for doing the work of the political” (Poletti 2011, 80). Thus, I suggest that the appropriate facilitation approach depends on the goals of a given digital storytelling project and the intended audience. In instances where the participant’s goal is to shift perception or inspire action among an unrelated audience, a more hands-on approach in sharing our expertise related to narrative construction, multi-media design principles and production may be in order. In this way we might improve

“the movement’s capacity to contribute to the diversification of voices in the (elite) public sphere where structural political change occurs” (ibid.).

Related to this third recommendation, there also appear to be opportunities to better support our participant storytellers in assuming ownership of their experience and the digital story product. Certainly, this is something Lambert alludes to when he suggests, “finding appropriate social contexts for sharing the work that would enliven the individuals and their communities to their potential for action” (Lambert 2009, 89). As facilitators who have expert knowledge related to holding and cultivating transformative space, perhaps we should ask: *Is there a role for us in also defining a likewise transformative space for our storytellers to be heard?* Allowing that a goal of digital storytelling is to empower and share authority, findings from this study suggest that practitioners could further cultivate agency among participants by having storytellers actively participate in designing the format for disseminating their work, and by connecting storytellers with platforms for sharing their stories if they wish. Indeed, the survey and interview data suggest that practitioners are thinking along these lines. For example, one respondent observed, “the life of stories after the workshop needs more attention. This is hard when the facilitator is hired for the three days and the budget is stretched even to do that, so less thought gets given to the afterlife.” Another respondent suggested a plan for involving the community in designing and owning these efforts:

I think a good way [to use digital storytelling more effectively] is to be connected with a community group before starting, and make a plan with them (if they are interested) to support them in hosting that discussion within their own community. It is important for me moving forward to incorporate this element in some way. Critical, really.

Clearly, there are tensions around time constraints and limited staffing and resources; however, when we suggest to storytellers that we are honoring their voice, but do not provide them with the tools that position them to be heard, we run the risk of undermining the very agency we seek to encourage. As Lora Taub-Perivizpour asks, “...once we have listened deeply, what are we to do? What actions do [these stories] demand of us? ...engagement should not end with the stories” (2009, 251). Rosemary Henze, an anthropologist who uses video and story in anthropologically-informed social change efforts that share similar goals around agency writes:

Social justice documentaries and other arts-based projects don’t independently produce publics equipped with agency. It is through what comes afterward (as well as before) that such equipping might (but doesn’t necessarily) happen. ...I no longer think that a video documentary creates social change. If there is any social change taking place, it is through this entire node of associations. ...I now ask, ‘What can dialogue lead to?’ (2016, 231).

Just as a midwife will help new parents transition to parenthood, facilitators have a role to play in engaging our storytelling partners in determining how best to serve themselves (or their communities) through story. Moreover, I suggest a modest investment in extending the digital storytelling process to include efforts that support and connect storytellers with dissemination resources and venues could potentially reap significant rewards in terms of sustaining the digital storytelling genre and generating a grassroots commitment to expanding its relevance. Along these lines, Tanja Dreher points to a lost opportunity when digital storytelling is viewed as the end-point in the process: “the opportunity for voice must be understood not as an end-point, but rather as a vital starting point for ongoing processes of engagement and debate, negotiation and response” (2012, 166). By easing storytellers’ transition into the public sphere, perhaps we may make some progress toward addressing the unresolved scalability questions John Hartley has raised: “whether [the digital storytelling] *form* is better suited to distribution via festival, broadcasting or network and whether the method can succeed without relying on the resources of education or community arts/media organizations” (2008, 201-202). Perhaps we should ask our storytellers....

In summary, findings from this study point to a context in which digital storytelling works to cultivate this emergent, transformative space – a context in which facilitators explicitly recognize issues of positionality, representation and power in their work *with* storytellers. Indeed, the art of digital storytelling practice is in how facilitators convey humility through their approach. I suggest facilitators can work to extend our practice of humility by opening ourselves up to vulnerability as peers in the process, by preparing through self-study when working as “outsiders”, by taking a more hands-on approach when the goal is to foster understanding across ideological or cultural divides, and by assuming a more supportive role connecting storytellers who seek a platform with opportunities to be heard.

Bringing Digital Storytelling to Cultural Sustainability Practice

Shifting the focus, this section considers how digital storytelling can inform cultural sustainability practice – i.e., working in partnership with communities to support the values and priorities they identify as meaningful. What might researchers, social scientists, community partners and other knowledge producers learn from the digital storytelling approach?

At its most fundamental level, the digital storytelling process suggests a method for bridging understanding. As one survey respondent described, “the story circle is a model of how to hold divergent experiences, perspectives and opinions as equally valid in the same space.” Another respondent noted that digital stories “can have a dual purpose of developing strength and self-

awareness within the group, and also the purpose of portraying the fundamental humanity of the group to others.” Findings from this study point toward digital storytelling as a natural next step for working with communities in an ethical manner that promotes cultural sustainability goals. Specifically, the digital storytelling approach suggests a method for engaging community members as partner knowledge producers to ensure that research design, process and outcomes arise from the community (i.e., are community-based), include the community (i.e., are culturally-informed) and serve the community’s goals. Moreover, given that cultural sustainability emphasizes not only cultural studies, but also a partnership approach to community- and capacity-building more generally, digital storytelling represents a highly portable, narrative approach to catalyzing work within community. In this sense, digital stories can “become ‘things to talk with’, constructed objects which foster dialogue and discussion” (Freidus and Hlubinka 2002, 24).

In terms of social science research, the digital storytelling approach holds promise as a powerful participatory research tool. Indeed, digital storytelling is already being used in venues where issues of culture and tradition are foregrounded and norms are confronted (e.g., Briant, *et al.* 2016; Cueva *et al.* 2016; Gray, *et al.* 2010; Hopkins 2006; Willox, *et al.* 2012). For example, digital storytelling has been used as an ethnographic approach that involves the community in surfacing salient research questions through story (e.g., Gubrium 2009; Njeru, *et al.* 2015) – questions that are sometimes like water to fish...concealed in the taken-for-granted beliefs and value systems that communities are unlikely to articulate directly. Through digital storytelling, the researcher can engage community members “as participant observers in their own lives” (Gubrium *et al.* 2016). Along these lines, Willox *et al.* have also piloted the use of digital storytelling as a narrative-based data-gathering method that can potentially “illuminate lifeways and lifeworlds of those telling the stories” (2012, 4).

In developing recommendations for bringing insights from the digital storytelling process to our toolbox of methods for working with community partners, I am also considering ways in which this process illuminates and helps us to deconstruct who we are as “experts” in this work. In other words, *what privilege do we assume when we authorize ourselves to tell someone else’s story?* I suggest the digital storytelling model can help to illuminate our own positionality as researchers, as well as inform methods for working with communities with humility. Certainly, the digital storytelling approach can serve to creatively unsettle the researcher/subject dynamic. For example, Mariela Nuñez-Janes sees opportunities to introduce digital storytelling into ethnographic research as a way to inspire reflexivity and shift the researcher role from

“expert” to that of *witness*: “When we observe and interpret through the lens of a witness, we are encouraged to pay attention to the motives that underline our ethnographic inquiry” (2016, 238). Moreover, the collaborative nature of the digital storytelling approach enables us to expand how we think about knowledge production. As one facilitator I spoke with put it:

...when you write an article as a scholar...it's often your voice and maybe a couple other people who are in the project or in the research system. Whereas if you facilitate a digital storytelling workshop, then there's all these different stories all made by individuals who decide to participate. So it's a different way that knowledge can be produced and information can be explored and understood and translated (Ramona Beltrán, personal communication, Sept 21, 2016).

Thus, beyond data-gathering, I suggest the digital storytelling approach also presents a promising method for involving the community as knowledge producers. For example, digital storytelling potentially provides a mechanism to member-check ethnographic products and assumptions before they are re-presented beyond the community (i.e., via academic publications) or are used to inform research-based recommendations. Along these lines, researchers might use photographs or other visual media collected in the course of an ethnographic project as prompts to generate additional insights from the community. In other words, reflecting these products back to the community to generate a digital story dialogue in response. Inviting the community's participation in this way ensures that emic perspectives and multiple viewpoints inform research conclusions (Chaffee 2016, 441). Furthermore, the resulting dialogue and digital stories produced may reveal further insights – or even limitations – related to how the emerging visual ethnography has been framed. A related approach to engaging the community in research might be to conduct an “image walk” where participants take photos in response to a research-related story prompt.²⁰ The photos and digital stories that result will provide an “insider's” representation and framing, and may be more likely to resonate with fellow participants and community members, especially in cases where stories will be used to stimulate dialogue around community- and capacity-building. In short, as we set out to represent and document, I suggest digital storytelling offers a complementary approach – one that foregrounds community “voice” and sends a clear message to the communities we work with that their perspectives – their *stories* – are critical to take into account. Opening such a

²⁰ Given that stories are “relational entities,” researchers should establish guidelines with participants about representing others in their stories, and may wish to restrict photography to material culture versus people to protect the privacy of proximate others (Dush 2013, 637). For example, researchers could challenge participants to photograph emotions without including people. NOTE: an emotional response need not be sad, and might include guilt, joy, fear, passion, etc.

dialogue may ultimately challenge how we privilege the academic gaze – the “narrative” – over emotional ways of knowing our world – our “stories”.

Web Resource – The Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub

In conducting this research, it became clear to me that digital storytelling practitioners represent a robust, tightly knit community of practice that has important expertise relevant to many of us working in the social science disciplines. Moreover, digital storytelling has exciting potential applications for advocates of all kinds who work collaboratively with communities to facilitate community- and capacity-building efforts, and in ways that seek to promote communication and understanding between disparate populations. While my goal was to explore the strengths of this methodology in terms of cultural sustainability goals, my findings point to clear opportunities to connect digital storytelling experts with cultural researchers and knowledge producers seeking to work in ways that promote equity and amplify community voice. In recognition of this need, the remainder of this paper outlines a website concept – the Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub (www.DigitalStoryHub.net). The name is intended to signify a gathering place for collaboration, while also evoking the story circle (as in the hub at the center of a wheel). The icon²¹ for the website depicts the hub as negative space – the emergent, dialogic space where meaning and understanding form in relationship through story:



This online resource is framed as a venue for growing awareness around digital storytelling, advocating for ethical and responsive community-based work through story, and sharing themes that surfaced in my research. The Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub aims to provide a unique forum for cultivating connections between the digital storytelling community (practitioners/facilitators) and those who work with communities – i.e., researchers, social

²¹ Design by paperraincoat.com.

scientists, community partners and other knowledge producers. In this way the Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub endeavors to expand the reach and uptake of the digital storytelling genre by engaging key stakeholders in the effort to amplify community voice. The website is thus framed as a neighborly *conversation over the fence*, leveraging the experiential knowledge of the digital storytelling community while at the same time making the case for digital storytelling as a method for knowledge production and a means for working with communities in an ethical manner that promotes cultural sustainability goals. In short, this web-based resource is conceived as a venue for further co-constructing this research and for contributing to the sustainability of the digital storytelling movement.

The Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub will seek whenever practical to show (versus tell) relevance by featuring stories, research projects and community programs that illustrate applications and suggest best practices. The Capstone version of the website will focus on the content originating from this research²²; a more robust version will include content from digital storytelling practitioners who will be invited to contribute reflections, digital stories, resources and recommendations on how digital storytelling can be adapted to work with communities and cultures. The enhanced version will also include a moderated forum – *The Hub* – that will host conversations around digital storytelling applications, as well as serve to connect researchers, advocates, community organizations and like-minded others with experienced digital storytelling practitioners who can offer advice and potentially collaborate on project and program designs. The forum is described in more detail in the sections that follow.

The Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub website is organized around three audiences: 1) the digital storytelling practitioner; 2) cultural researchers and other knowledge producers, such as community research collaborators; and 3) community partners and storytellers interested in learning about ways to incorporate digital storytelling in their work. This last audience might include individuals, non-profits, local governments and other civic organizations, corporations, educators and grassroots groups, among others. Website content related to each of these target audiences is described in the sections that follow.

Digital Storytelling Practitioners – The Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub will provide a platform for sharing themes that surfaced through this research process with the digital storytelling community, as well as for stimulating discussion and self-reflection around digital

²² See Appendix 3 for a site map and selected screenshots for the Capstone project version. The site will be launched on or about January 15, 2017 and updates and revisions will be ongoing thereafter as new content is contributed and incorporated.

storytelling practice. In addition to inspiring dialogue, the site will provide an opportunity to member-check with the digital storytelling community. What did I get right? What would the community like to expand upon or clarify? The goal will be to continue the conversation and reflect together on facilitation practice. A particular focus will be on critically considering the ways in which facilitators explicitly recognize issues of positionality, representation and power in their work with participant storytellers. Relevant discussions will aim to complicate whether “Best Practice” transcends the technology and method and will ask, *Who are we being in this work?* Practitioners will be invited to contribute digital stories in response to changing prompts – for example, *Create a digital story about a time when listening to someone changed your facilitation practice.* Such prompts are a familiar tool for digital storytelling practitioners who are accustomed to using prompts to engage workshop participants in self-reflection. The goal will be to engage this audience in sharing stories related to their experiences as facilitators – e.g., insights gained, humbling encounters – with the idea of both sharing lessons learned and modeling critically reflective practice among the practitioner community. Such stories would be a potential resource for facilitators-in-training and could conceivably be developed into a module for a formal practitioner training curriculum. Digital storytelling practitioners will also be invited to make recommendations for adapting digital story to work within community, and these contributions will serve to populate webpages designed to make the case for digital storytelling to other audiences, defined below.

Cultural Researchers & Knowledge Producers – The Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub will also invite dialogue around ethical work with cultures and communities, and relevant pages for this audience will explore digital storytelling as an innovative enhancement to cultural research practice. Similar to the content targeted toward the practitioner community, these pages will also seek to engage this audience in considering issues of positionality, representation and power in their work with communities. Key content of interest to this audience will include the digital storytelling primer and story examples, as well as the case for considering a digital story approach to community research. Specifically, content presented will make the case that a digital storytelling approach informs methods for working with communities with humility, by enabling us to deconstruct who we are as “experts” in this work and illuminating our own positionality as researchers. Cultural researchers and their research collaborators will be invited to participate in *The Hub*, a forum that will serve as a platform for engaging in conversations around these issues, as well as a venue for connecting, forming collaborations, brainstorming and sharing advice around digital storytelling research design. Initially, the relevant pages for

this audience will be populated with publications demonstrating how researchers are leveraging digital storytelling in their research. In addition, I include a sample research protocol to illustrate how digital storytelling might be used as a research tool and to stimulate discussion around feasibility (see Appendix 2). As with the practitioners' pages, cultural researchers and other knowledge producers will be invited to contribute to the site content – for example, by submitting publications or protocols for research underway that incorporates digital storytelling in the research design.

Community Partners & Storytellers – The Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub seeks to connect experts in cultural research and digital storytelling with community partners seeking to bring diverse perspectives to community development and capacity-building programs. As with the cultural research community, key content of interest to this audience will include the digital storytelling primer and story examples, as well as a case for the value of bringing a digital story approach to community-building endeavors. Community partners will also have access to *The Hub* (forum), where they can join the conversation, connect with others using digital storytelling for community- and capacity-building, and seek advice and expertise on developing and implementing their own programs.

Given the different levels of expertise of these audiences, the site will include a primer on the digital storytelling genre and process, as well as embedded digital story examples relevant to each audience.²³ The Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub will also point to digital storytelling organizations (e.g., ISTE Digital Storytelling Network, StoryCenter, DigitalStory Lab Copenhagen, and others) where visitors can learn more and connect directly to digital storytelling resources. There will also be information on facilitator training opportunities (initially linked to StoryCenter, but this will be later expanded to include representative opportunities internationally).

When initially launched, The Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub will be populated with content informed by this research project; however, the site is intended to be a collaborative resource that will evolve as members engage with and contribute to the site. In other words, the site will be launched as a framework for conversation and collaboration and visitors will be invited to contribute content and essentially co-create a more robust version that is responsive to the communities interacting with this resource. For example, digital storytelling organizations

²³ These will be added in later website iterations once permissions are obtained.

can request to be featured on the Resources webpage, and facilitators (and other knowledge producers) who have published on digital storytelling can also recommend additions to the bibliography. Links to digital stories submitted in response to the survey represent another potential data set to be added to the website. If this idea is of interest to members, I'll seek permission from respondents to share this emerging sub-genre of digital stories produced by facilitators.

The interactive forum – *The Hub* – described above will promote conversations that extend beyond those occurring in the digital storytelling community (e.g., the DS Working Group and practitioner conferences) to include *non-experts* seeking to connect and collaborate with the digital storytelling community. *The Hub* will be designed as one forum for all three audiences with categories to organize posts by topic area – e.g., culture workers seeking a digital storytelling practitioner in their vicinity, tech questions, advice related to working with specific populations, etc. I will serve as the moderator for *The Hub* and will also curate contributed content before it is uploaded to the website.

In terms of launching the website, I will preview the site with my digital storytelling gatekeepers (Weinshenker and Otañez) and solicit feedback regarding design, functionality and responsiveness to the digital storytelling community. I will also seek suggestions on how to publicize and recruit visitors to the site – from Weinshenker and Otañez, as well as from my network in Cultural Sustainability and related fields – in order to ensure that the site engages the target audiences and fulfills its co-creative intent. Potential venues for outreach include the DS Working Group, the StoryCenter blog (pending permission), the Goucher College Cultural Sustainability graduate student and alumni network, and via on-line cultural research forums such as PubLore.

Conclusion

This research problematizes the complex dimensions of digital storytelling by showing how facilitators influence story sharing and meaning-making in supportive and contradictory ways. Findings from this study suggest digital storytelling “best practice” transcends technology and method. The art is in the approach – one in which facilitators explicitly recognize issues of positionality, representation and power as they work with storytellers to cultivate this transformative space of self-reflection and disclosure. Related to this, there are opportunities to extend the digital storytelling process, and further promote agency among storyteller participants, by assuming a more supportive role in connecting storytellers who seek a platform with opportunities to be heard.

This study also reflects on similarities between digital storytelling and larger fields of dissemination and ultimately seeks to illuminate opportunities for leveraging the strengths of the digital storytelling approach in support of community values and priorities. Specifically, digital storytelling suggests a complementary approach to our efforts to not only re-present, but to empower our community partners. This approach engages communities in *performing* culture through story – showing rather than telling us and other audiences what has meaning and value and how these priorities intersect with the systems and relationships that make up our shared community landscape.²⁴ Digital storytelling is not intended to “give voice” – instead, it is a means of creating a space at the table, while fostering conditions that empower our community partners to speak for themselves.²⁵ As such, digital storytelling offers an approach to cultural sustainability practice that foregrounds community “voice” and sends a clear message to the communities we work with that their perspectives – their *stories* – are critical to take into account. Whether as a complement to ethnographic study, as a method for member-checking or as an innovative approach to inspiring dialogue, digital storytelling offers a model for cultural work practice that involves community members in knowledge production, as well as promotes equity by privileging the community’s voice and experiences.

In closing, findings from this study suggest that the intention to “leave no fingerprints” is not only related to the goal of honoring the storyteller’s truth – it is also a promise to the audience. This intention suggests that an audience may trust that a story is “authentic” only when a participant arrives at that story on her own. To expose the facilitator’s power over the process brings this authenticity into question. However, in digital storywork – as with any work in community – to claim that we “leave no fingerprints” diminishes the process. How can we claim deep listening without being *present* to listen?

²⁴ As Elaine Bliss has noted, “the sharing of, and bearing witness to, individual stories allows [digital storytelling] workshop participants to express their emotional ‘truth’ but also encourages constructive and contextualised critique. This experience creates an opening for the performance of power relations in a mediated timespace that may unite research and activism in a single political process.” (2015, 247).

²⁵ Dwight Conquergood has suggested opportunities for unsettling “the text-bound structure of the academy” through performance and asks, “What kinds of knowledge are privileged or displaced when performed experience becomes a way of knowing, a method of critical inquiry, a mode of understanding?” (1991, 190).

Digital Storytelling Practitioners Questionnaire

The Purpose of this Study

I am a graduate student pursuing a Masters of Arts degree in Cultural Sustainability. Cultural Sustainability seeks to support individuals and communities in identifying, protecting, and enhancing their important traditions, their ways of life, their cherished spaces, and their vital relationships to each other and the world. I am conducting a study that seeks to learn more about emerging trends and innovations in digital storytelling, and the role of digital storytelling practitioners in this process. As part of this research I am surveying and interviewing digital storytelling practitioners to better understand how these professionals facilitate meaning-making by participant storytellers. This project will also explore ethical considerations related to digital story co-creation, public dissemination, and the politics of representation in the context of individual and community narratives. My research will critically assess digital storytelling as a potential methodology for the Cultural Sustainability toolbox, and potentially result in recommendations or models for adapting the digital storytelling methodology to Cultural Sustainability practice. Once the research is complete, I will analyze the data and develop a publicly available resource that synthesizes findings from my research and presents best practice models, as well as recommendations for adapting the digital storytelling methodology more broadly in work with diverse communities.

If you elect to participate in this project, please complete the following brief survey regarding your perspectives and approach to digital storytelling practice. The survey should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete. Your responses will be kept confidential. A sub-set of survey respondents will be asked to participate in a follow-up interview. If you also elect to participate in the follow-up interview(s), these would be conducted by phone, Skype, or in-person at your convenience. The focus of these interviews will be to further expand upon topics raised in the initial survey. Thank you for sharing your perspectives and expertise!

Digital Storytelling Practitioners Questionnaire

Practitioner Role, Experience & Skills

* 1. What is your role in the digital storytelling process? (Check all that apply)

- ☐ Lead facilitator
- ☐ Co-facilitator
- ☐ Technical assistant

Other (please specify)

* 1a. Length of time in this role:

- ☐ Under 1 year
- ☐ 1-3 years
- ☐ Over 3 years

* 1b. Name of group/organization that provided you with training in digital storytelling facilitation:

2. Describe two or more of your personal strengths as a facilitator:

3. Discuss two or more skills or techniques that have been most successful for you in helping participants create a compelling and meaningful story of their experience:

Digital Storytelling Practitioners Questionnaire

Digital Storytelling Philosophy

* 4. In addition to facilitating story crafting (technique), the digital practitioner has a role in facilitating meaning-making, such as through self-reflection and deconstruction with a trusted partner.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

* 5. In terms of the digital storytelling process, how do you view your role on the following scale?

Facilitator ("leave no
fingerprints")

Producer (participate in
shaping stories)

5a. What is your philosophy regarding the risk/value of co-authorship?

Digital Storytelling Practitioners Questionnaire

Digital Storytelling Applications

6. Discuss two or more ways you have applied digital storytelling in a fruitful and rewarding way. Provide details.

7. Discuss one or more ways that you believe digital storytelling can be used more effectively by participants? Community groups? Facilitators?

8. Are there settings or contexts in which digital storytelling has not been applied but could be? Describe some underexplored applications.

Digital Storytelling Practitioners Questionnaire

Reflections on Digital Storytelling

9. What is your favorite moment relating to your work as a digital storytelling facilitator? Please provide a brief description of that moment.

10. What is your least favorite moment relating to your work as a digital storytelling facilitator?

Optional: Please indicate your email address below if you would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview.

Optional: Provide a weblink(s) to a digital story you created.

Optional: Can you recommend to me a digital storytelling facilitator who may be interested to complete this survey? Provide details.

Appendix 2: Digital Storytelling as a Participatory Research Tool

A Sample Research Protocol

The digital storytelling approach suggests a method for engaging community members as partner knowledge producers to ensure that research design, process and outcomes arise from the community (i.e., are community-based), include the community (i.e., are culturally-informed) and serve the community's goals. The following suggests one way digital storytelling might be applied to research with communities.¹

Step 1 – Identify research topic and community.

Step 2 – Become acquainted with the [digital storytelling genre](#) and [connect with the community](#) to identify practitioners with experience facilitating workshops related to your topic and/or with your target population. For researchers new to digital storytelling, practitioners can advise on logistical and technical setup², provide insights regarding best practices, as well as valuable guidance for your approach to the community (Step 4) and connect you with digital storytelling training opportunities.

Step 3 – Participate in a digital storytelling workshop. A key principle of digital storytelling practice is first-hand participation in a workshop. These workshops are emotionally demanding, and it's essential to be able to identify with the storytelling participant's perspective of the process. This experience should inform the prompts the researcher develops to elicit stories (Step 7). Researchers who plan to actively participate as co-facilitators should also participate in facilitators training(s).³

Step 4 – Identify gatekeeper(s) – individuals and/or organizations who can assist in providing access and introductions to the community. Propose digital storytelling as a community-based participatory approach to conducting a needs assessment that involves the community in identifying salient research questions to guide research design. Ideally, the gatekeeper(s) would introduce the researcher to the community at an appropriate community forum where the researcher can present the project goals and again articulate interest in involving participants in developing the project design, as well as partnering on research and publication. Along these lines, the community forum can be leveraged as a means of involving the community in developing prompts that fit their project goals. The forum will also provide a first opportunity to assess interest and solicit the community's advice on recruiting participants. *How much time can potential participants reasonably commit? (i.e., Will a 3-day workshop format be appropriate?) Will accommodations or incentives facilitate broader, more inclusive participation (e.g., childcare, transportation vouchers, or other compensation)?* Digital storytelling practitioners with experience working with your research community will also have additional advice along these lines.

Step 5 – Assemble your digital storytelling facilitation team. Whenever feasible, at least one member of the team should represent the participant storyteller (community) demographic. Ideally, this would be a trusted member of the community other than the gatekeeper, who is willing to learn from an experienced practitioner how to facilitate digital storytelling workshops (i.e., a train-the-trainer approach). If a community member is not available, seek an experienced facilitator from the digital storytelling community who matches the project population demographic.

Step 6 – Based on feedback from the gatekeeper(s) and community, finalize the workshop schedule, venue and incentives (if appropriate) and work with the gatekeeper(s) to recruit workshop participants. An ideal participant to facilitator ratio is about 3:1, but may need to be adjusted for groups with limited computer literacy.

Step 7 – Conduct digital storytelling workshop(s) using prompts that generate stories related to the research topic. In developing prompts, allow plenty of leeway for participants to choose how to represent themselves and their experiences in ways that do not anticipate the salient issues for the community. Examples⁴ might include:

Write about a time when listening to someone changed something for you.

Tell about the most important time you stood up for yourself or for someone else.

Write about a time you looked at yourself through the eyes of another.

A related approach might be to conduct an “image walk” where participants take photos in response to a research-related story prompt.⁵ The photos and digital stories that result will provide an “insider’s” representation and framing.

Throughout the workshop, the facilitation team should work to intentionally level the playing field between facilitators and participant storytellers. This is often best accomplished with humility and transparency – by explicitly communicating a willingness to learn, and by recognizing the potential for mistakes as the group gets to know one another. Whenever practical, facilitators should also share personal stories, as well as use their own digital stories to illustrate design elements, technical issues, etc. This opens up opportunities to reciprocate with stories, and critique without making participants feel vulnerable. Other strategies for interrupting the facilitator/participant power dynamic include: 1) involving participants in designing story prompts that reflect their concerns, as well as ground rules for the story circle; 2) staggering facilitators around the table among participants rather than at the “head” of the table⁶; and 3) acknowledging positionality, privilege or assumptions we may bring to this work.

Step 8 – Allow sufficient time following the story screening to have a facilitated discussion of the stories among the workshop participants. Ask: *What did participants hear?* Assess participants’ interest in hosting a community screening and further discussion.⁷

Step 9 – Following the digital storytelling workshop, debrief among the facilitation team, and analyze stories for themes related to issues, challenges, meaningful moments/relationships, etc. that the community storytellers identify as important. If participants have agreed to a community screening/discussion, this provides an opportunity to member-check outside of the workshop as well. Alternatively, facilitators can meet individually with participants to reflect themes back to the storytellers and check for (dis)agreement.

Step 10 – Design a research question and approach that is responsive to salient issues that surfaced in the digital storytelling workshop and in collective follow-up discussions with the community. The digital storytelling approach can also be used iteratively throughout the research process. For example, researchers might use photographs or other visual media collected in the course of an ethnographic project as prompts to generate additional insights from the community. In other words, reflecting these products back to the community to generate a digital story dialogue in response. Inviting the community’s participation in this way ensures that the community participates in informing research conclusions. Furthermore, the resulting dialogue and digital stories produced may reveal further insights – or even limitations – related to how the emerging visual ethnography has been framed.

The ultimate goal is to design and conduct the research project in a way that is accountable to the community that informed the work.

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¹ This protocol is for illustrative purposes only; it is not intended to address Institutional Review Board requirements.

² For a summary of the challenges, skillsets and steps for implementing a digital storytelling workshop, see: Dush 2009.

³ Alternatively, Willox *et al.* make a case for training community facilitators and suggest that research goals are best served when the researcher does *not* participate with the community in their digital storytelling workshop. They distinguish this approach as "a method that puts the participant story and lived experience first, and that allows researchers to analyze the stories only after they have been created and does not include the researchers until the stories are finalized and produced" (2012, 12). In either case, it is essential that the researcher prepares by participating in a digital storytelling workshop in order to become familiar with the process and to experience the participant storyteller's perspective. This experience is important in that it will 1) inform the workshop design – e.g., adapting the format in order to accommodate different competencies or cultural norms; and 2) inform the design of prompts – e.g., how do participants experience prompts that are directed vs. open-ended?

⁴ Source: StoryCenter

⁵ Given that stories are "relational entities," researchers should establish guidelines with participants about representing others in their stories, and may wish to restrict photography to material culture versus people to protect the privacy of proximate others (Dush 2013, 637). For example, researchers could challenge participants to photograph emotions without including people. **NOTE:** an emotional response need not be sad, and might include guilt, joy, fear, passion, etc.

⁶ In addition to helping to mitigate power, staggered seating enables the facilitation team to better observe participants and provide assistance or emotional support to participants who are in need.

⁷ Whenever practical, involve storytellers in designing the format for disseminating their work and connect storytellers with platforms for sharing their stories if they wish.

Appendix 3: The Collaborative Digital Storytelling Hub (<http://www.digitalstoryhub.net/>)
Site Map [Selected Screenshots]

❖ **About [Figure A.1]**

- Objectives [Figure A.2]
- What is Digital Storytelling? [Figure A.3]
 - Digital Storytelling Resources (organizations and facilitation training)
 - Intro Readings
 - *Pending video content:* Featured Digital Story
- Research Methods
 - Respondent Demographics & Facilitators Survey [Figure A.4]
 - Stories from the Field – Themes [Figure A.5]
 - Tradition vs. Experimentation
 - Transformation through Story [Figure A.6]
 - Surfacing Story
 - Leave No Fingerprints
 - The Role of Audience
 - Relevance & Sustainability
- Download full final report
- Contact & Moderator Bio

❖ **Digital Storytelling Practitioners [Figure B.1]**

- Culturally-informed Practice [Figure B.2]
 - The Hub [Forum link]
 - Link to final report
- Space to Reflect [Figure B.3]
 - Share your Story [Contact link]
- Scholarship & Stories
 - Scholarship [Publications; Figure B.4]
 - *Pending video content:* Featured Digital Story
 - Contribute [Contact link]

❖ **Cultural Researchers & Knowledge Producers [Figure C.1]**

- What is Digital Storytelling?
- A Digital Storytelling Approach to Research [Figure C.2]
 - Additional Benefits

- Research Design Principles [**Figure C.3**]
 - Sample Protocol
 - Recommend a Protocol [Contact link]
- Scholarship & Stories
 - Ethnography & Participatory Action Research
 - ◆ Contribute [Contact link]
 - Alternative Knowledge Production [**Figure C.4**]
 - ◆ Contribute [Contact link]
 - Public Education, Health Promotion & Advocacy
 - ◆ Contribute [Contact link]
 - Contribute [Contact link]
 - *Pending video content:* Featured Digital Story
- Link to final report
- The Hub [Forum link]
- Digital Storytelling Resources (organizations and facilitation training)
- ❖ **Community Partners & Storytellers**
 - What is Digital Storytelling?
 - A Digital Story Approach to Community Programming [**Figure D.1**]
 - Scholarship & Stories
 - Scholarship [Publications]
 - ◆ Contribute [Contact link]
 - *Pending video content:* Featured Digital Story
 - Contribute [Contact link; **Figure D.2**]
 - Link to final report
 - The Hub
 - Digital Storytelling Resources (organizations and facilitation training) [**Figure D.3**]
- ❖ **The Hub** [*forum platform/content pending website launch*]

Screenshots

Figure A.1

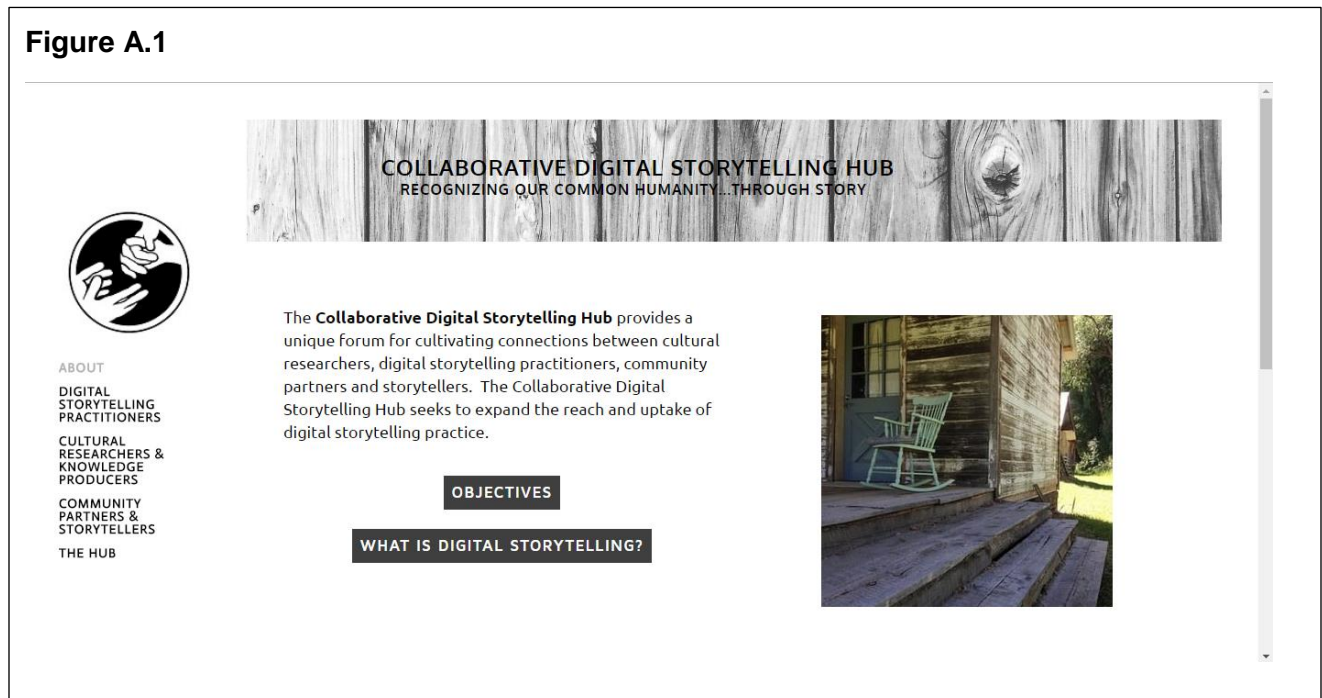


Figure A.2

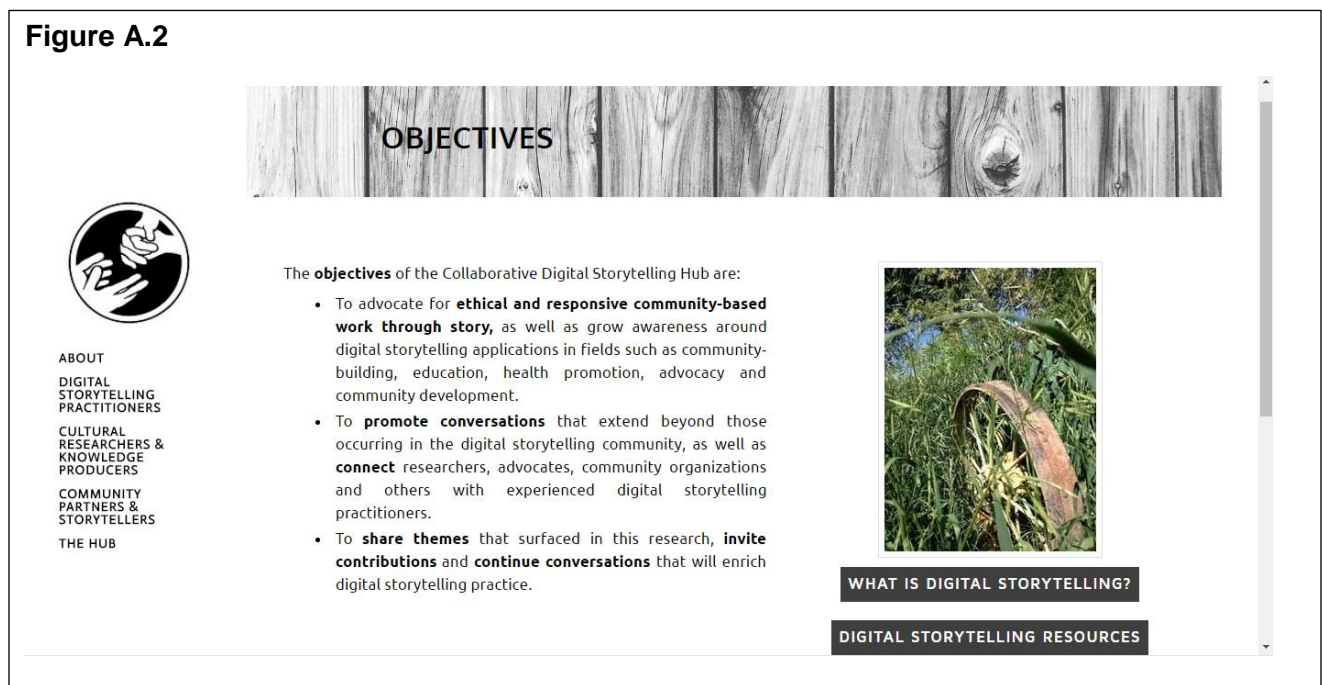


Figure A.3



Figure A.4

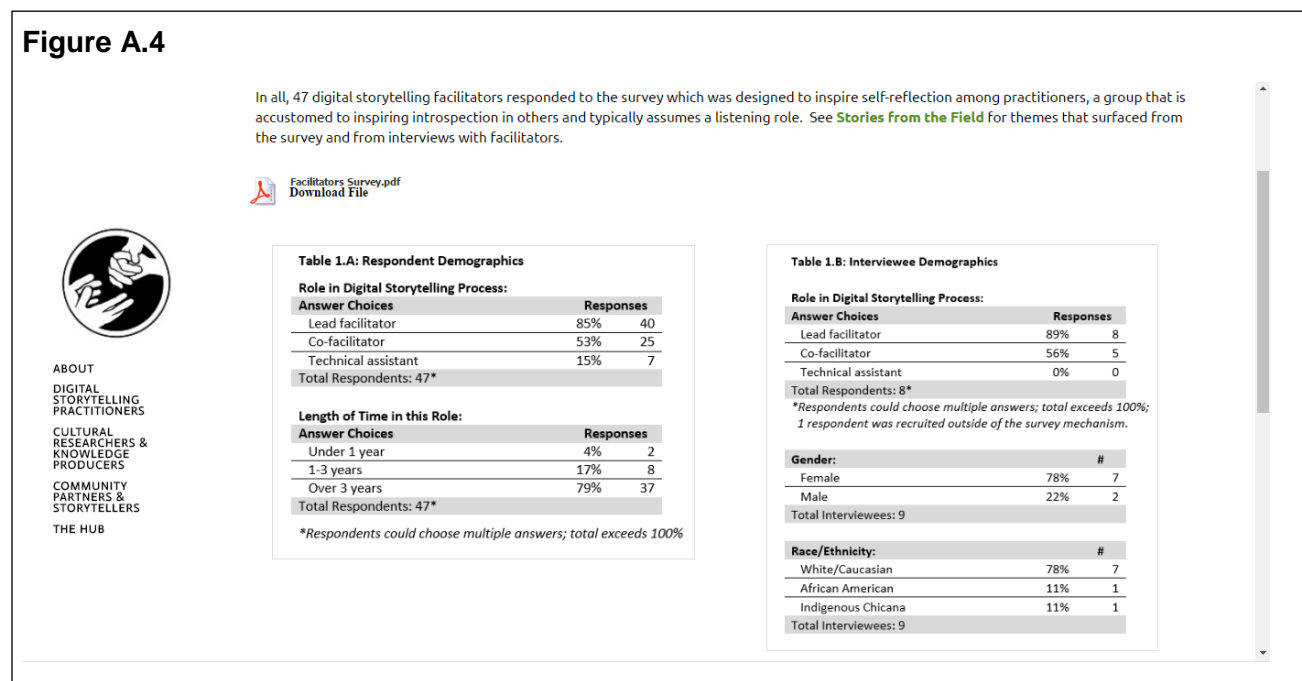


Figure A.5

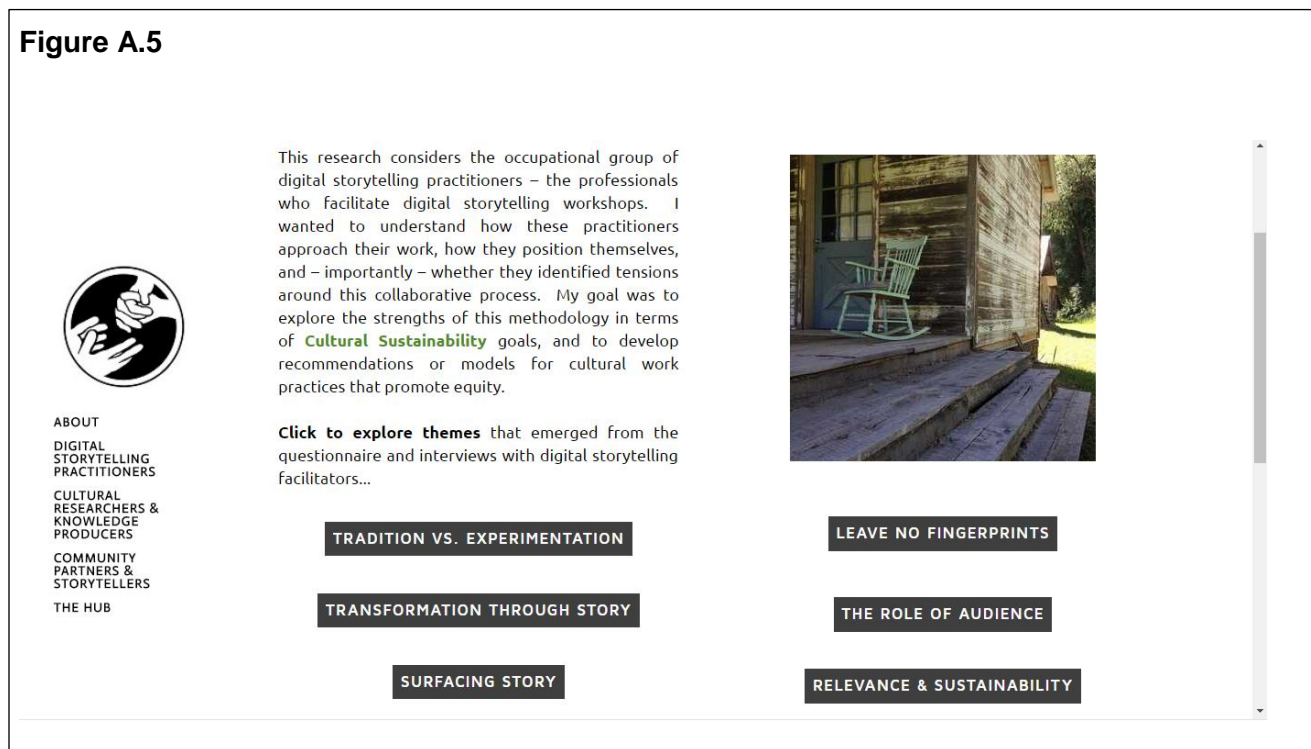


Figure A.6

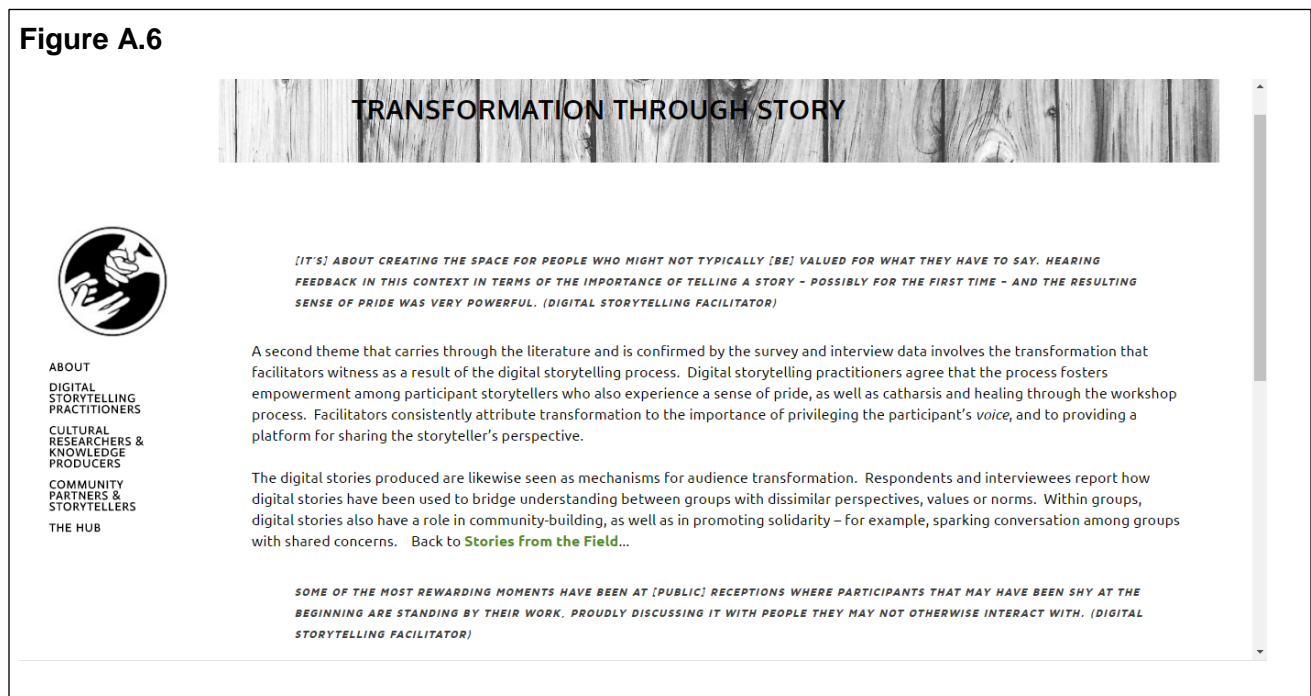


Figure B.1

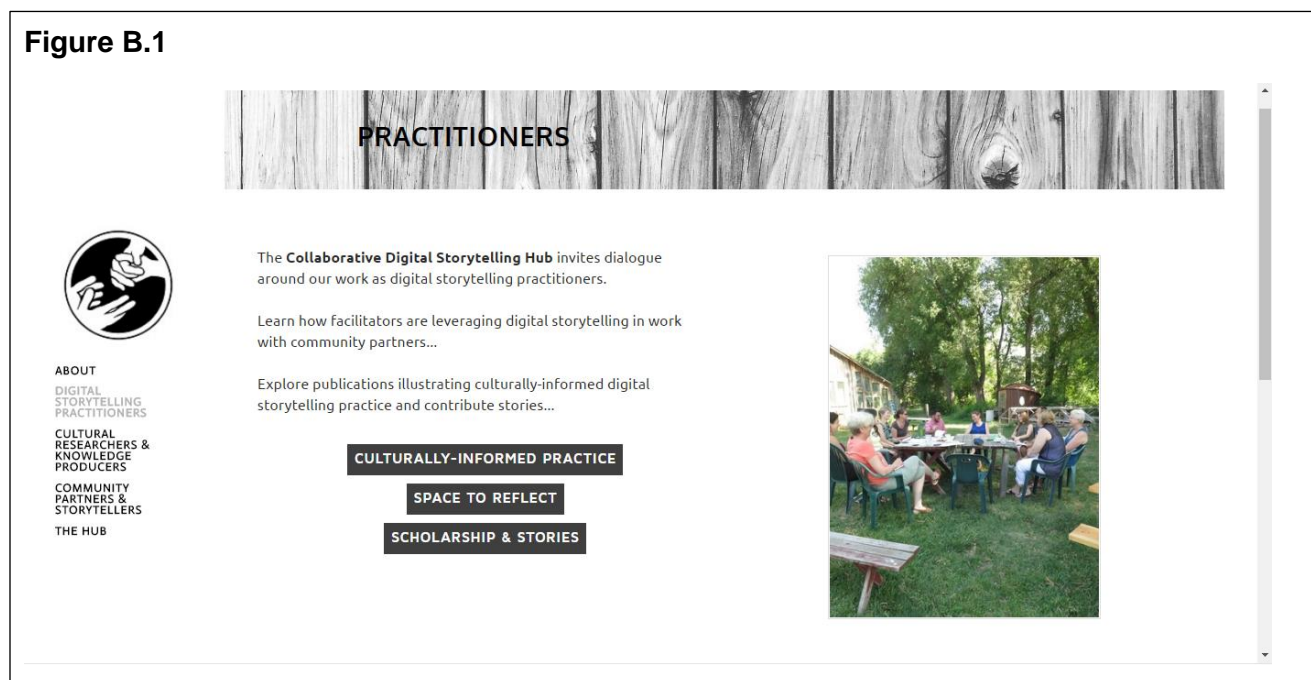


Figure B.2

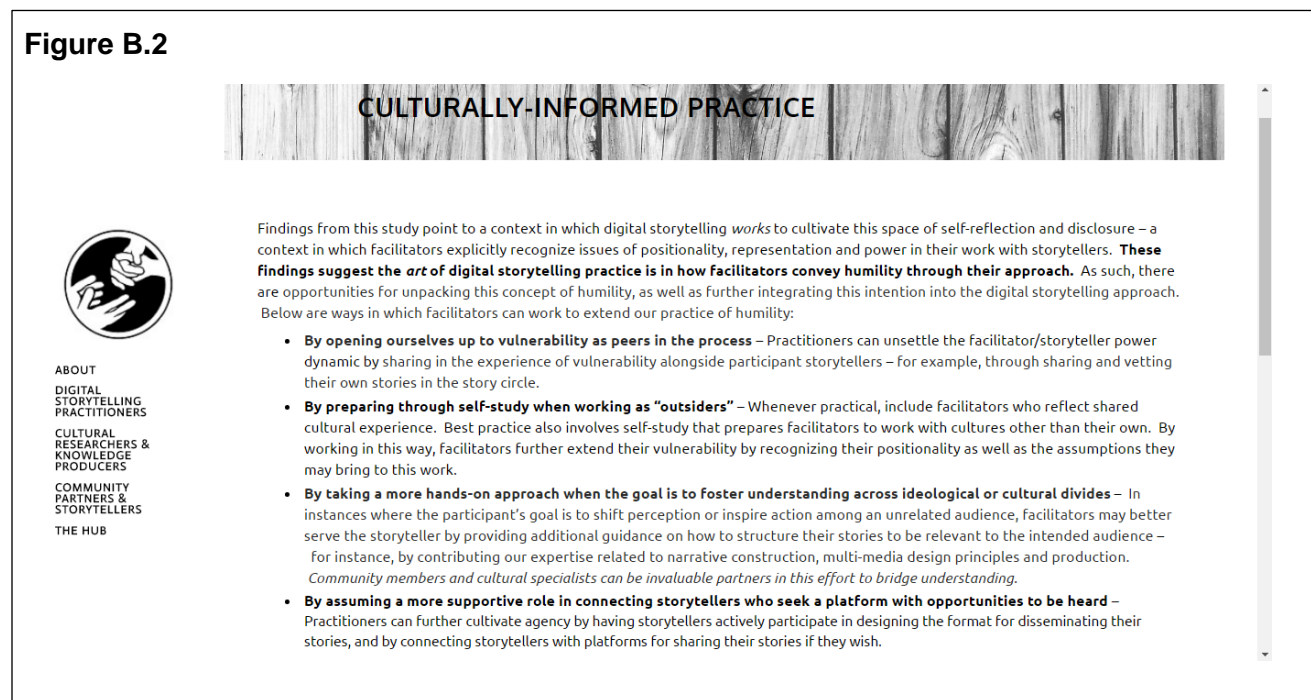


Figure B.3

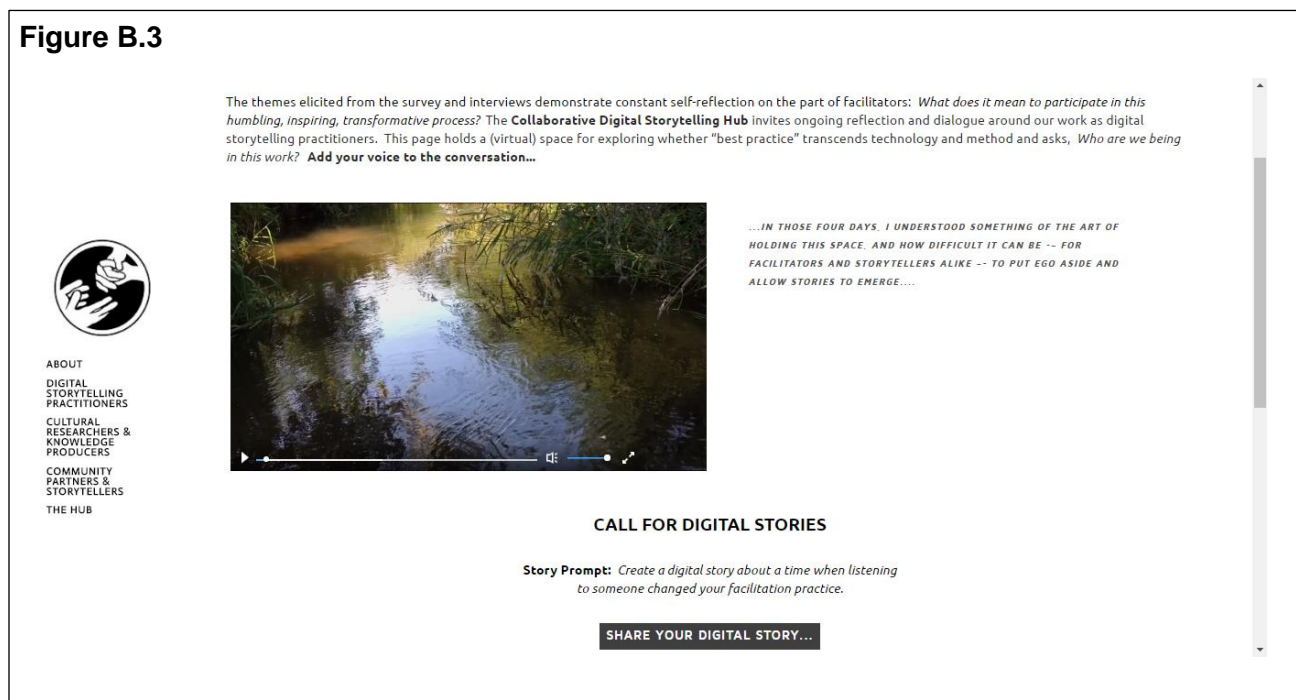


Figure B.4

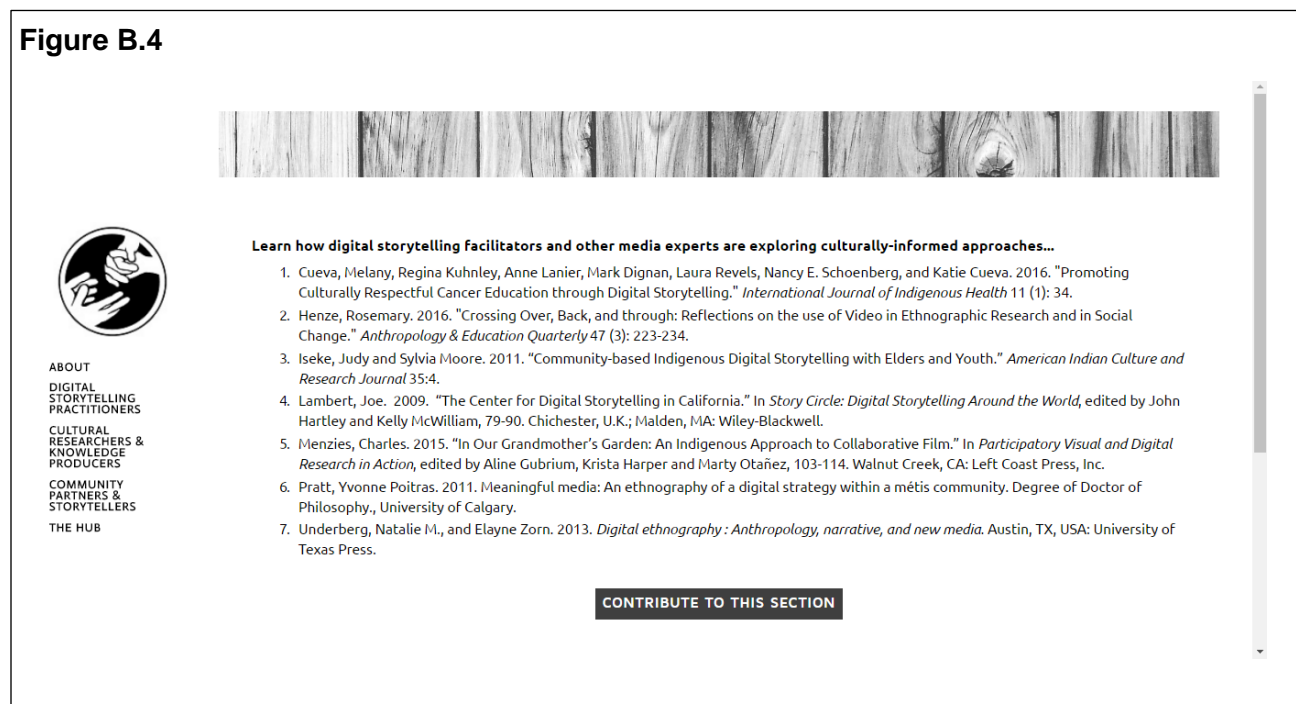


Figure C.1



Figure C.2



Figure C.3



Figure C.4

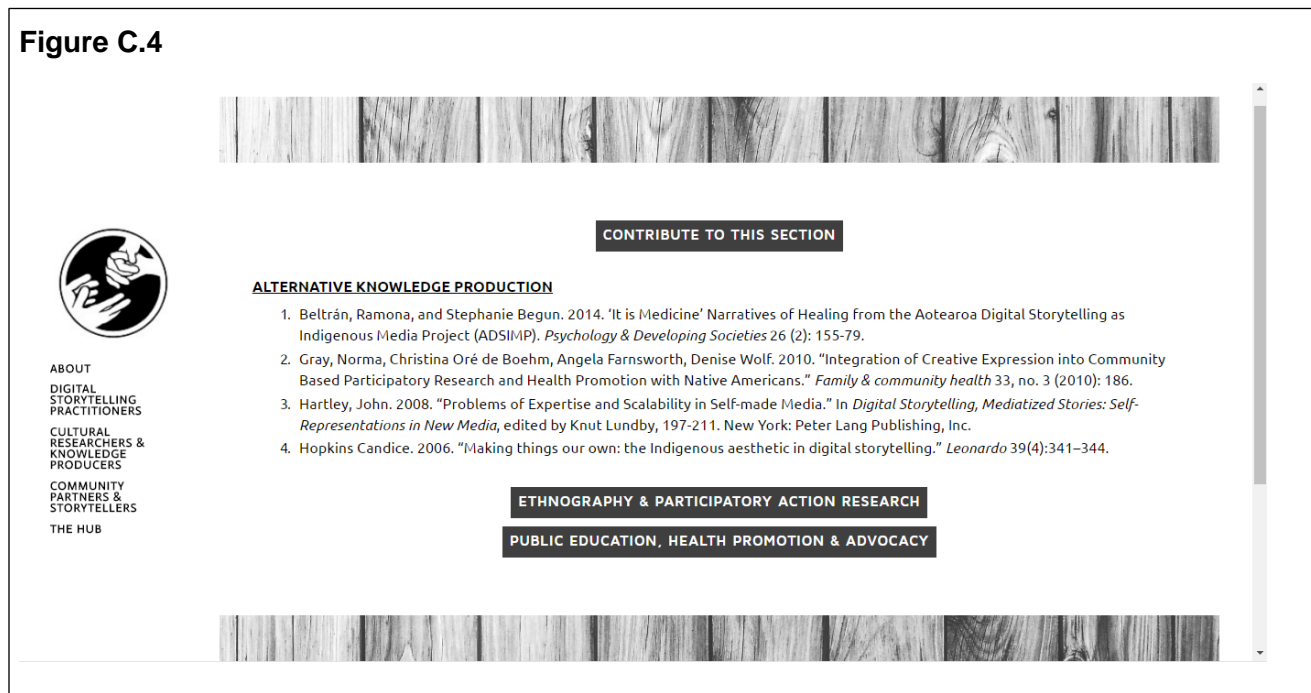
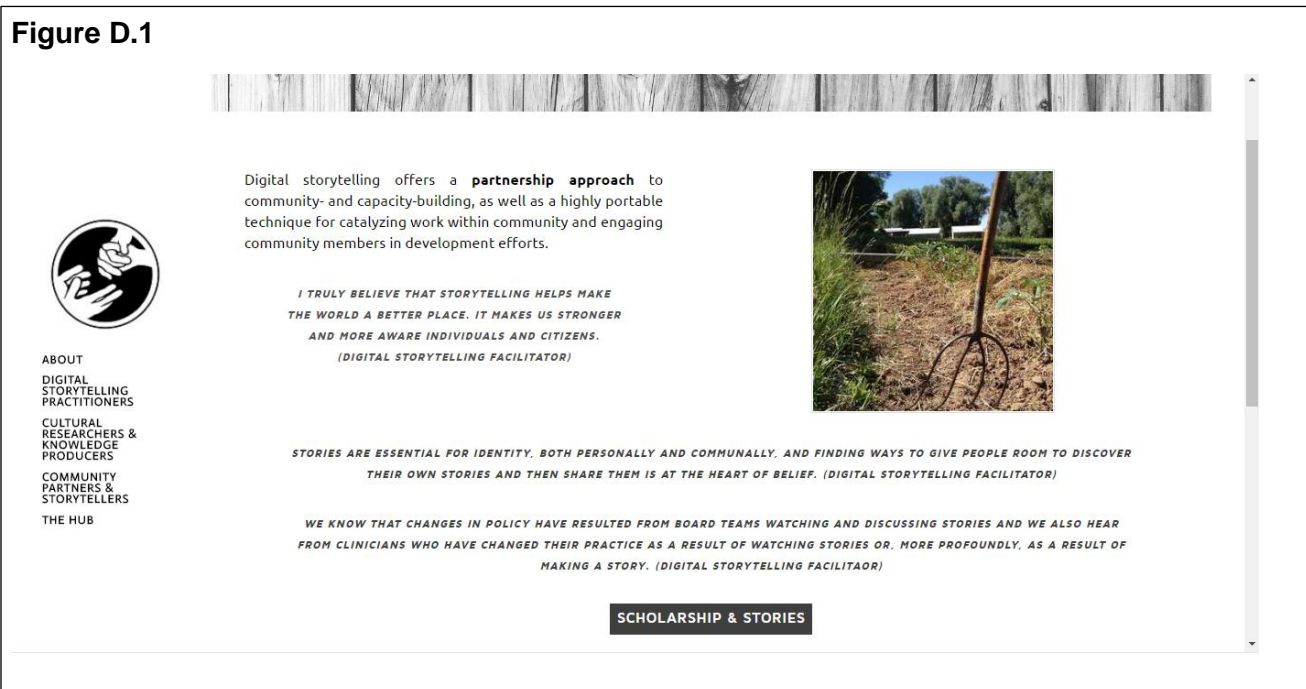


Figure D.1



Digital storytelling offers a **partnership approach** to community- and capacity-building, as well as a highly portable technique for catalyzing work within community and engaging community members in development efforts.

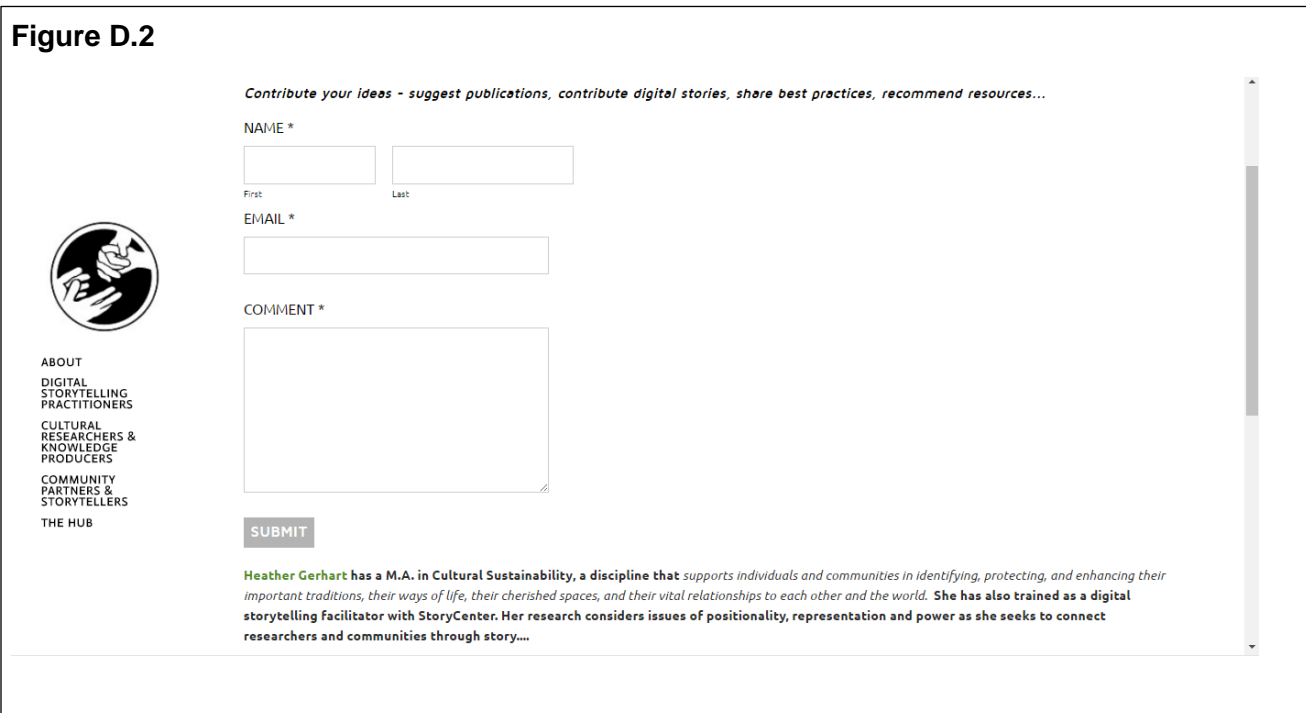
I TRULY BELIEVE THAT STORYTELLING HELPS MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE. IT MAKES US STRONGER AND MORE AWARE INDIVIDUALS AND CITIZENS.
(DIGITAL STORYTELLING FACILITATOR)

STORIES ARE ESSENTIAL FOR IDENTITY. BOTH PERSONALLY AND COMMUNALLY. AND FINDING WAYS TO GIVE PEOPLE ROOM TO DISCOVER THEIR OWN STORIES AND THEN SHARE THEM IS AT THE HEART OF BELIEF. (DIGITAL STORYTELLING FACILITATOR)

WE KNOW THAT CHANGES IN POLICY HAVE RESULTED FROM BOARD TEAMS WATCHING AND DISCUSSING STORIES AND WE ALSO HEAR FROM CLINICIANS WHO HAVE CHANGED THEIR PRACTICE AS A RESULT OF WATCHING STORIES OR, MORE PROFOUNDLY, AS A RESULT OF MAKING A STORY. (DIGITAL STORYTELLING FACILITATOR)

SCHOLARSHIP & STORIES

Figure D.2



Contribute your ideas - suggest publications, contribute digital stories, share best practices, recommend resources...

NAME *

First Last

EMAIL *

COMMENT *

SUBMIT

Heather Gerhart has a M.A. in Cultural Sustainability, a discipline that supports individuals and communities in identifying, protecting, and enhancing their important traditions, their ways of life, their cherished spaces, and their vital relationships to each other and the world. She has also trained as a digital storytelling facilitator with StoryCenter. Her research considers issues of positionality, representation and power as she seeks to connect researchers and communities through story...

Figure D.3



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